

Black identity-making in Flanders: Discourses and cultural practices among transracial adoptive families and black native speakers of Flemish.¹

Katrien De Graeve and Sibö Kanobana

Introduction

Flanders, the predominantly Flemish-speaking northern part of Belgium, experiences an increasing popularity of Flemish autochthony or native discourses. This is evidenced by the electoral success of political parties that favour Flemish independence and draw on an imagery of an authentic Flemish culture, in which whiteness and Flemish language are fundamental identity markers. However, neoliberal and multicultural narratives of colour-blind meritocracy and equal opportunity also prevail, identifying cultural difference as the major obstacle to immigrant integration while denying and invisibilizing white privilege. This “racism without races” (Balibar, 1992, Bonilla-Silva 2006/2003) draws on a discourse of cultural incompatibility between “real” Flemish culture and Muslim culture in particular and uses non-European immigration as a substitute for the notion of race within a discourse that justifies xenophobia as

¹ Although we use racial markers throughout the chapter, we employ them fully acknowledging that they do not refer to some essential nature or fixed difference between people. We deliberately choose not to capitalize them when referring to a perceived skin colour, culture, or ethnicity as such avoiding to presuppose the existence of a Black people or culture in Flanders similar to e.g. Black/African-American culture in the US (see e.g. Matory, 2015). It must also be noticed that black as a translation of the Dutch word ‘*zwart*’ spans a different semantic field than the words ‘black’ or ‘Black’ in the English language.

human beings' "natural" fear of difference.² While racism is forbidden by law and officially and socially condemned it is simultaneously explained as an understandable reaction to immigration and incommensurable cultural differences. Racism solely based on bodily aspects is thought to have become almost extinct, living on only in the minds of a relatively small group of neo-fascist extreme-right sympathizers.

The experiences of (1) predominantly white Flemish parents of African-descent adoptive children and (2) young people (including adoptees) who self-identify as Afro-descendent native-speakers of Flemish are an interesting lens to look at this ethics of colour-blindness and the widespread official denial of the social and political relevance of race. Prevalent discourse would suggest that the Afro-descendants' fluency in Flemish language and culture exempts them from racialization and racial discrimination.

This chapter aims to explore how their testimonies disrupt the prevalent narratives of self and otherness. The racialization that these black Belgians experience cannot be explained by reference to culture, language, religion or ethnicity. However, these are often the sole aspects that are brought up to argue for the existence of racism in a multicultural and colour-blind Flemish society that lacks the words to speak of race. By juxtaposing the discourses and parenting work of the predominantly white adoptive parents of black children with the discourses

² Bambi Ceuppens and Sarah De Mul, "De vergeten Congolees. Kolonialisme, postkolonialisme and multiculturalisme in Vlaanderen," in *Een leeuw in een kooi : de grenzen van het multiculturele Vlaanderen*, ed. Karel Arnaut, Sarah Bracke, et al. (Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2009), 48-67; Verena Stolcke, "Talking culture: New boundaries, new rhetorics of exclusion in Europe," *Current Anthropology* 36(1995): 1-24.

and cultural practices of black Flemish native speakers, we aim to lay bare some of the ambiguities and complexities that challenge black identity-making and belonging.

Our chapter is structured as follows. First, we present our methodology and say a word about our own positioning. Second, we briefly describe colour-blindness, as this is how race is generally dealt with in the specific local context of our studies. The next three sections present our empirical findings, with a first section on the participants' experiences of race and racialization and their opinions on the use of racial terms and the second and third empirical sections focusing on the participants' practices of identity building. We close this chapter then with some concluding remarks.

Methodology

This chapter draws on two sources of data collected in Flanders, Belgium. The first set of data is drawn from a study that was carried out between 2008 and 2012 by the first author, examining dominant discourses surrounding Flemish-Ethiopian transnational adoption. This study included about sixty in-depth interviews with adoptive parents and professionals, complemented with participant observations during adoptive parents' gatherings and analyses of media texts and policy documents. The adoptive parents who participated in the interviews were mostly middle-class, highly educated and predominantly white men and women. The motives for adopting a child varied, from infertility or illness, to the wish for "helping an orphaned child". Their number of children ranged from one to six and several families had both children by birth and by adoption. Although all families had adopted at least one child from Ethiopia, a few families had also adopted children from other countries such as Vietnam and China. The children's ages varied from a few months to twenty-five years old, although the majority of the families had smaller children.

The second set of data consists of eleven interviews conducted between 2011 and 2015 with Flemish young adults between twenty and thirty-five years old who self-identify as Afro-descendants. These interviews are part of an ongoing study on black identity building in Flanders, carried out by the second author. The interviewees were diverse in terms of gender (seven men, four women) and migratory background (two have migrated from and nine were born to at least one parent who migrated from Africa, the Caribbean or Brazil). Four of the informants were adopted – two transnationally and two domestically. All participants belonged to middle and high socio-economic status, were highly educated, had successful careers (nine) or were students within the higher education sector (two). In spite of the participants' varying family and migratory backgrounds, they all share the experience of being fluent in the Flemish dominant language and cultural practices while their phenotypical features often mark them as outsiders. By analysing the experiences of black adoptees together with the experiences of black and biracial people with other migratory backgrounds we aim to contribute to a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant psychopathological discourse of adoption as a reproductive technology rather than as a practice of forced migration. The similarities and differences in experiences of both groups make it possible to challenge narratives that tend to explain adoptees' identity struggles solely in terms of purported psychological deficiencies and failure to attach to their adoptive families.³

Ethnographic fieldwork with in-depth interviews allowed to probe the participants' experiences and perceptions and to gain insight into the ambiguous and complex ways in which

³ Katrien De Graeve, "‘They have our culture’: negotiating migration in Belgian-Ethiopian transnational adoption," *Ethnos*, 80(1)71-90.

they understand racialized identity-making and belonging. Both studies are underpinned by definitions of identity as narratives of people about themselves and others, verbal or constructed as specific practices, rather than as descriptive of the person or a possessive property in itself.⁴ Focusing on identity as narratives of location and positionality, we aim to problematize “the epistemological and ontological status of identity and critique the forms of politics based upon these more effectively, while still treating identity as a *socially* meaningful concept” (italics in original).⁵ We are furthermore guided by intersectional theories of identity and discrimination, which look at subjectivity as constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class and sexuality.⁶ Yet, while we recognize the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects’ lived experiences and the complexity of identity, we aim to specifically focus on the category of race, and what this category means for our participants, in light of the virtual disappearance of race as

⁵ N. Yuval-Davis, “Theorizing identity: beyond the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 44, no. 3 (2010): 261-280; Floya Anthias, “Where do I belong?: Narrating collective identity and translocational positionality,” *Ethnicities* 2, no. 4 (2002): 491-514

⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299; Alice Ludvig, “Differences Between Women? Intersecting Voices in a Female Narrative,” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2006): 245-258; Baukje Prins, “Narrative Accounts of Origins A Blind Spot in the Intersectional Approach?” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2006): 277-290.

a category and it's replacement by references to religion, ethnicity, language or culture in the European context.⁷

While recognizing the instability of the insider-outsider duality and people's many strands of identification,⁸ both studies can be considered auto-anthropological. The first author considers herself a white Flemish-speaking Belgian and is an adoptive mother of a child born in Ethiopia. The second author was born in Congo as the son of a Rwandese-Congolese father and a Belgian mother, migrated to Belgium as a toddler and self-identifies as a black native speaker of Flemish. We have both investigated a social context of which we are part of and of which we have an extensive practical knowledge about. Our personal experiences not only affected our views and understanding and are an important part of our embodied social positioning. They also played an important role in shaping the fieldwork such as for instance by bringing about a dynamic of experience-exchange during interviews. But as Mascarenhas-Keyes (1987) argues,⁹

⁷ Sirma Bilge, "Intersectionality undone. Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10, no. 2 (2013): 405-424.

⁸ Khalil Nakhleh, "On being a native anthropologist," in *The Politics of Anthropology : From Colonialism And Sexism Toward a View From Below*, eds. Gerrit Huizer and Bruce Mannheim (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 343-352; Kirin Narayan, "How native is a "native" anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993): 671-686; W. Onyango-Ouma, "Practising anthropology at home," in *African Anthropologies: History, critique and practice*, eds. Mwenda Ntarangwi et al. (London, New York, Dakar: Zed Books, 2006), 250-266.

⁹ Mascarenhas-Keyes, S, "The native anthropologist: Constraints and strategies in research," in *Anthropology at home*, ed. Anthony Jackson (London: Tavistock, 1987), 180-195.

anthropology at home also requires a “professional induced schizophrenia between the ‘native self’ and ‘professional self,’” with processes of unlearning and producing “a sense of defamiliarization vis-a-vis unquestioned forms of knowledge.”¹⁰

Colour-blindness in Flanders

Ellen: I don't think that family is on vacation here. I think they live here.

Sven: What family?

Ellen: You know, that [hesitates]...brown family [*die bruine familie*].

Sven: Come on! What are you saying now? That *brown* family?” [everyone laughs]

Ellen: But, how do I have to say it then? I think *black* [*zwart*] sounds so harsh.

Sven: You could say: *African* family.

Ellen: But what's wrong with *brown*? I use that word with Sisay [her adopted son] as well. Sisay uses it as well.

Sven: Or you could have said: “the family with the bucket”.

¹⁰ Lynn Worsham, “Writing against writing: The predicament of *écriture féminine* in composition studies,” in *Contending with words : Composition and rhetoric in a postmodern age*, eds. Patricia Harkin and John Schilb (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1991), 101.

This is a conversation which the first author overheard when being on vacation with a befriended couple who are adoptive parents of an Ethiopian born son. It took place after a black man had passed by together with a boy who carried a bucket. Ellen's hesitation revealed her difficulties in talking about racial difference because of the negative connotations that surround race due to long history of oppression of black people. What this conversation illustrates is not only a general discomfort with "colouring talk."¹¹ It also shows an unease with blackness as such, and therefore the impossibility of finding any term that would be considered merely descriptive when talking about a phenotype that reveals ones Sub-Saharan African ancestry without having any negative undertones. The suggestion to abandon any racial reference and refer to the family with the bucket leads us to a colour-blind approach *as if* we do not see race.

In this section we discuss some of the social, political and historical factors that have paved the way for the colour-blind multiculturalism and hegemonic whiteness structuring Flemish society. We briefly sketch how Belgian colonial and migration politics shaped dominant conceptualizations of Flemishness as a set of explicitly articulated characteristics (e.g. being fluent in Flemish language) and assumptions that remain unspoken (such as whiteness).

Our studies are situated in Flanders, a term that refers to both the Flemish region and the Flemish community, governed by a relatively autonomous regional and community government within the Belgian federal state. The official language for education, administration and the legal system is Dutch (also called Flemish when referring to the various spoken variants of Dutch in Flanders). Apart from the Flemish language, "real" Flemishness remains heavily associated with

¹¹ Anna Rastas, "Racializing categorization among young people in Finland," *Young* 13, no. 2 (2005): 147-166.

physical whiteness and a Christian-secular culture, and this is in spite of a significant cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversification of the Flemish population since the 1960s. Over the last three decades in particular, Belgium has become a country of settlement for many different types of migrants.¹² The official zero-immigration doctrine since 1974 never produced a complete closure of the borders, yet generated a shift from labour migration to family, asylum and humanitarian migration (Martiniello 2012). The immigration of children through transnational adoption is a form of (family) migration that is most privileged, and even proactively supported by the government as a middle class reproductive option. Since the 1960s children have been adopted from a variety of different countries, yet the most important “suppliers” of adopted children to Flanders from 1992 to 2015 were Ethiopia (916), India (639), and China (473).¹³

White people in Flanders generally do not fully acknowledge their own historically shaped and structural advantage over people of colour and often think of themselves as having no particular race, ethnicity or culture at all (the Dutch word *blank* is commonly used to refer to

¹² Recent figures indicate that in Belgium 19% of the population is foreign born, of whom 37% outside the EU. See: <http://www.myria.be/files/Migratie-verslag-2015-samenvattingen.pdf> (accessed 10 March 2016). However, the percentage of Belgian inhabitants with a non-European background is much higher but cannot be measured. No ethnic data are collected and second or more generation immigrants tend to ‘disappear’ from official statistics (Martiniello, 2012).

¹³ See: <http://www.vlaanderen.be/nl/publicaties/detail/activiteitenverslag-vlaamse-centrale-autoriteit-inzake-adoptie-vca> & <http://www.kindengezin.be/adoptie/over-vca/cijfers/#Cijfers-buitenlandse-adop> (accessed 10 March 2016).

white people's skin colour, which has different meanings, including colourless, transparent and pure). Moreover, from their privileged positions, they are often unaware of how the colonial past is still present and of the way how "racist notions and actions infiltrate everyday life."¹⁴

Stereotypical and often degrading representations of black people for example still circulate in the Flemish public sphere as well as imageries of white people's responsibility to help and uplift black people which stem from a long history of (neo)colonial and paternalist relations between Belgium and its former colonies in Central Africa.¹⁵ Belgium's policy towards its former colonial subjects was however somehow different than that of other European imperial powers. Firstly, Belgian colonial subjects had no access to Belgian citizenship at all. Secondly, few Central Africans were even allowed to visit Belgium.¹⁶ The presence of black people in Flanders was therefore a rare occurrence before the independence of Belgian Congo in 1960. Moreover, migration from Sub-Saharan Africa only became significant in the 1990s¹⁷ and is currently part

¹⁴ P.J.M. Essed, "Racial Intimidation: Sociopolitical Implications of the Usage of Racist Slurs," in *The Language and Politics of Exclusion : Others in Discourse*, ed. Stephen H. Riggins (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997), 50.

¹⁵ Ceuppens, Bambi and Sarah De Mul, "De vergeten Congolees. Kolonialisme, postkolonialisme and multiculturalisme in Vlaanderen," in *Een leeuw in een kooi : de grenzen van het multiculturele Vlaanderen*, ed. Karel Arnaut, Sarah Bracke et al, (Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2009), 48-67.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Q. Schoonvaere, Q. "Studie over de Congolese migratie en de impact ervan op de Congolese aanwezigheid in België: Analyse van de voornaamste demografische gegevens: Studiegroep

of a “superdiverse”¹⁸ entry of refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants from mainly the non-Western world.¹⁹

Today, however, even with a much larger number of black people in Flemish society—the Congolese diaspora currently constitutes the third largest group of Belgians of non-European descent²⁰—black Belgians still have a limited voice in the public arena. This may explain why in Flanders and in Belgium in general, a critical debate on colonial history and the postcolonial legacy still seems to be lacking.²¹ Furthermore, colonial stereotypes are still reproduced and

Toegepaste Demografie (UCL) and Centrum voor Gelijkheid van Kansen en Racismebestrijding,” 2010.

¹⁸ Steven Vertovec, “Super-diversity and its implications,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30, no. 6 (2007): 1024-1054.

¹⁹ Karen Phalet and Marc Swyngedouw, “Measuring immigrant integration: The case of Belgium,” *Studi Emigrazione / Migration Studies* XL, no. 152 (2003): 773-803.

²⁰ Bambi Ceuppens and Sarah de Mul, “De vergeten Congolees. Kolonialisme, postkolonialisme and multiculturalisme in Vlaanderen.” in *Een leeuw in een kooi : de grenzen van het multiculturele Vlaanderen*, ed. Karel Arnaut, Sarah Bracke, et al. (Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2009), 48-67

²¹ Katrien De Graeve, “Geographies of Migration and Relatedness: Transmigrancy in Open Transnational Adoptive Parenting,” *Social and Cultural Geography* 16, no. 5 (2015): 522-535.

several studies demonstrate a racial exclusion pattern for instance within the sphere of housing,²² in working life²³ and in the education sector²⁴.

Nevertheless, and as in many other European countries since World War II, race is no longer considered a relevant category of social stratification in Flanders and “real” racism is considered to exist only in the sick mind-set of a few extreme right-wing people. A dominant ideology of colour-blind neoliberalism and multiculturalism²⁵ claims that everyone has equal opportunities irrespective of skin colour or ethnic background. Yet, this logic usually explains/justifies discrimination against immigrants through references to minorities’ cultural differences but not to any differences in physiognomy.

The experience of racialization

In this section we will present and discuss how the participants in our studies talked about racialization in the cultural context of colour-blindness described in the previous section. While almost all the participants testified to having witnessed or been the subject of racialization, they

²² Koen Van der Bracht, Pieter-Paul Verhaeghe and Bart Van de Putte, *Gelijke Toegang tot Huisvesting voor elke Gentenaar: Onderzoeksrapport* (Gent: Ghent University, 2016).

²³ Stijn Baert, Bart Cockx, Niels Gheyle and Cora Vandamme, “Is There Less Discrimination in Occupations Where Recruitment Is Difficult?” *ILR Review* (2015).

²⁴ Orhan Agirdag and Burcu Korkmazer, “Etnische ongelijkheid in het onderwijs,” in *Armoede en Sociale Uitsluiting. Jaarboek 2015*, eds. D. Dierckx, J. Coene, P. Raemaekers and M. van der Burg (Leuven/Den Haag: Acco, 2015), 231-249.

²⁵ For instance, see Melissa F. Weiner, “The Ideologically Colonized Metropole: Dutch Racism and Racist Denial,” *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 6 (2014): 731-744.

tended to employ different strategies of framing these experiences and of relating to the prevailing interpretative schemes.

Many of the participants in both studies recounted stories of experiences of racialization. Several of the adoptive parents with babies or toddlers, for instance, talked about recurring situations in which their children were admired by groups of people exclaiming how cute black babies are. Daan, the father of Axel, a boy from Ethiopia, recalled a colleague's remark that clearly refers to the image of black men being prone to encounters with the police:

Daan: "I had told a colleague that I wanted to take Axel to an athletic club. [...] I believe he will be good at it. [...] And that colleague said: 'That's a good idea, so he can practice in running away from the police.'"

Several of the parents reported that their child had expressed a wish to be white repeatedly, as such suggesting that processes of exoticization and objectification which, as Root argues, deny a

black person agency and self-determination,²⁶ together with the overpowering normativity of whiteness in society²⁷ even drive some adoptive children to dislike their own non-white bodies.²⁸

All participants in the second study recounted instances of being racialized, intentionally or unintentionally, by strangers but also by white friends, partners or family members. It is important to note that while most of the participants had at least one black parent, they all grew up in a predominantly white environment, had many white friends and/or a white partner. Many of the experiences they described, concerned instances of being racialized by close friends or family members, whose interactions with black people start from the dominant racial frame and are therefore often *unconsciously* racializing. Noah, for instance, described a situation in which a friend was seemingly unaware of the painful effects of her comments and the implicit meaning of what she said (i.e. that dark skin colour is something that needs to be coped with and overcome):

²⁶ Maria P.P. Root, "The multiracial experience: Racial borders as a significant frontier in race relations" in *The multiracial experience : racial borders as the new frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), xiii-xxviii.

²⁷ Ruth Frankenberg, "Growing up white: Feminism, racism and social geography of childhood," *Feminist Review* 45(1993): 51-85; Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a color-blind future : The paradox of race* (New York: Noonday Press, 1998).

²⁸ Gloria Wekker, Cecilia Åsberg et al., *Je hebt een Kleur, maar je bent Nederlands" : Identiteitsformaties van geadopteerden van Kleur* (Utrecht: Leerstoelgroep Gender Studies, 2007); Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a color-blind future : The paradox of race*.

Noah: “A good friend of mine said one day, and she thought she said something nice to me, she said: “Noah, actually, I see you as a white person” and I said: “How do you mean? Do you think it’s wrong to see me as a black person? Why do you say this so explicitly?”

Other people’s use of colouring talk and racial terms was often mentioned by the participants in the second study as examples of situations in which they felt racialized. Although participants seemed to agree that none of the Flemish racial terms were void of racist connotations, they had different opinions on which terms they found acceptable and which they found utterly offensive. Many indicated that they did not feel comfortable with the term *zwart*, and they expressed a tension they did not observe in the English equivalent “black” or the French term “noir”. In many Flemish dialects *zwart* not only refers to the colour “black” but is also a synonym for dirty. Tina, for instance, said:

Tina: “I didn’t like it when people called me *zwart* as a child [...]. I am brown, just look, my skin is rather brown (laughs).”

“Brown” was often considered a more neutral term than black, as this term seems to describe more accurately the actual skin colour of black people and avoids the myriad of negative connotations attached to the word *zwart*. At the same time, because of existing chromatism discourses which differentiate black people according to the tone of skin and presses the darkest skinned to the lowest level of the racial hierarchy,²⁹ “brown” also tends to soften the difference

²⁹ Glenn (ed.), E. N. (2009). *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press

in skin colour between white and black people (as well as between white adoptive parents and their black adopted child).

Although reported as common, occurrences of racialization were not always considered of great importance by the participants. Many of the adoptive parents, in particular, tended to adopt a relativizing stance and/or tried to fit incidents of racialization within their own frames of experiences. Maaïke, for instance, the adoptive mother of two young boys, believed that the use of racial slurs on the school playground was not fundamentally different from “normal” teasing for other reasons:

Maaïke: “Kids can be tough on each other. They search for each other’s weaknesses. And then they say ‘four eyes’ (*brillenman*), ‘redhead’ (*rossekop*), ‘freckle-faced’ (*sproetenkop*) or ‘chocolate mousse’ (*chocomousse*). They always find something.”

While bullying can have detrimental effects anyway, by ignoring the racializing dimensions of slurs, adoptive parents may fail to provide their children with the necessary tools to defend themselves when faced with racism or racializing experiences, particularly as adults.³⁰ Studies on white parents in mixed race families and on transracial adoptive families have also shown that white parents are faced with a greater challenge in teaching their non-white children how to

³⁰ Tobias Hübinette and Carina Tigervall, *Contested adoption narratives in a Swedish setting*; Gloria Wekker, Cecilia Åsberg et al., *Je hebt een Kleur, maar je bent Nederlands* : *Identiteitsformaties van geadopteerden van Kleur*.

resist and cope with racial stereotypes.³¹ The unmarked racial identity of the white parents is constantly reinforced as whiteness is the societal norm, and they therefore tend to embody “the very racial privileges that they are unable to transfer to their African descent children.”³²

Furthermore, white parents often do not fully acknowledge potentially devastating racial stereotypes and are often likely to downplay the severity of racializing incidents that do take place.

But also some of the people in the second study tended to downplay racialization or to adopt a rather pragmatic stance. While they indicated they not like being racialized, their knowledge of and being embedded in white culture prompts them to judge situations by the underlying intentions of their interlocutors. For most participants feeling hurt by racialization seemed to be largely dependent on the context and the underlying intentions of the speaker. In

³¹ Claudia Castañeda, “Adopting technologies: Producing race in trans-national adoption,” *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 9, no. 1-2 (2011): 1-9; Christine Ward Gailey, *Blue-ribbon babies and labors of love : Race, class, and gender in U.S. adoption practice* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010); Carina Tigervall and Tobias Hübinette, “Adoption with complications: Conversations with adoptees and adoptive parents on everyday racism and ethnic identity,” *International social work* 53, no. 4 (2010): 489-509; France Winddance Twine, “Transracial mothering and antiracism: The case of white birth mothers of ‘black’ children in Britain,” *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 3 (1999): 729-746; Gloria Wekker, Cecilia Åsberg et al., *Je hebt een kleur, maar je bent Nederlands" : Identiteitsformaties van geadopteerden van kleur.*

³² France Winddance Twine, “Transracial mothering and antiracism: The case of white birth mothers of ‘black’ children in Britain,” 741.

spite of her dislike of the term *zwart*, for instance, Tina had no objections to her grandmother using it.

Tina: “My grandmother used to call me ‘my blacky’ (*mijn zwartje*), but she meant it as a nice thing, I was the apple of her eye.”

Even the term “*neger*,” which, in spite of growing objections, is also still quite often used in Flanders to refer to people who have phenotypical features revealing Sub-Saharan ancestry, was experienced by some of the participants as being acceptable when they believed that the user was not aware of its offensive nature.

Moreover, in spite of their extensive network of white friends and family members, the participants in the second study indicated that racialization was an experience they found was difficult to talk about with white people. Many of the participants believed that white people are unable to understand what it means to be black, as racism or the experience of being racialized, is beyond their own experience. Bart stated that even when white people may be treated differently when they travel to Africa for example, this different treatment, even when being rude, hostile or unfriendly, is never dictated by the idea of racial inferiority that undergirds racism against black people. He said:

Bart: “A white person, seriously, will never experience this, this is something I’m really convinced of, a white person will hardly experience such a thing. Yes, in Africa... but still, they [people in Africa] elevate white people, so, they will never make a white person feel inferior.”

The participants said that they therefore usually choose not to react to racist comments, and even keep their thoughts to themselves. They indicated that white folks not only have difficulties in

understanding what it means to be racialized but also even tend to take on a defensive stance when being alerted to the effects of what they said or did. The participants recounted experiences of being criticized for being oversensitive, being blamed for lacking a sense of humour or suffering from inferiority complex when they had made white people attentive to the racializing implications of their words. By doing so, white people unintentionally turn a societal problem into a psychological and individual problem or a character problem of the black person, which becomes a problem which is the latter's responsibility to solve. Some of the participants indicated that because of the prevalence of these mechanisms, they often prefer to ignore racializing comments.

Many of the participants had ambivalent feelings towards racialization, simultaneously minimizing its impact and indicating to feel hurt. Bart, for instance, who was adopted from Haiti, started by clearly explain that for him racism is not a big issue and he actually enjoys looking different. Nevertheless, further on in the interview he suddenly stated:

Bart: "These jokes about slaves, about blacks. I can't stand that. Even people I know very well, people I like, of whom I know they just say it to fool around. Even then, there is something about me, I can't help it, it's stupid, but I can't stand it."

Experiences of racialization were generally described as having negative consequences for the participants' sense of belonging in Flanders. Participants reported a variety of emotions that accompany their experiences of racial discrimination. While some described that these

experiences made them feel stronger, other testified that the cumulative nature of everyday racism³³ at times causes anger. Or as Bart phrased it:

Bart: “These are just minor things, but when these experiences pile up, it can induce a certain aggressiveness.”

Olga explained how for her, racism is not just what white people do to black people, as it is a deeply ingrained system of oppression which is upheld by both white and black people simultaneously. She stated:

Olga: “The greatest success of colonization and slavery is the colonization of the African mind. [...] The fact that people interiorized it [inferiority] and pass it on to their children.”

Although she definitely did not consider herself as someone whose “mind has been colonized”, she believed that many other black people have interiorized racist assumptions, which might make them to act racist towards other black people too. Tina who is an adoptee, also reported having been treated in a racist way by other black people, a kind of racism that she felt was even more hurtful than the racism she experienced from white Belgians. She recounted that other non-adopted blacks often call her “not black enough” because she grew up in a white family and therefore question her authenticity. The fact that she experienced this rejection as more painful, implies that while she rejects race as a valid category and stresses that she is just as Flemish as

³³ Philomena Essed, “Racial intimidation: Sociopolitical implications of the usage of racist slurs.”

any other person, the belonging to a black racial group identity still matters more than she would like to admit.

Flemish identity-making

In this second empirical section, we will look at and discuss Afro-descendent participants' strategies of self-making, in particular related to Flemish identity. We will investigate whether the participants in the second study (want to) identify with Flemish identity and how this identification is constrained and/or enabled. We argue that the dominant imagery of what it means to be Flemish as well as the context in which Flemish nationalism has been appropriated by right-wing populist parties hamper the participants' ability to identify as Flemish and/or leads them to plead for more inclusive conceptualizations of what it means to be Flemish.

When the participants in the second study were asked whether they consider themselves *Flemings* or not, many rejected this identity-marker. Bart, who is adopted, was quick to say:

Bart: "Flemish? Me? No! Flemish people are white people."

Thus he reproduced/criticized the discourse of an authentic Flemish culture, in which whiteness is a fundamental identity marker. The participants' assessment of Flemish culture resulted from their lived experiences of being marked as outsiders. Many of the participants, for instance, referred to recurring experiences of being automatically addressed in French or English. The participants showed a great deal of understanding concerning this misconception, as many black people in Flanders *are* indeed Francophone or English speakers. As the Belgian colonial venture

in Central Africa was principally a Francophone affair,³⁴ Belgian colonialism has not produced a significant number of Flemish-speaking black people, and this also contributes to the automatic assumption that most blacks are Francophone. The participants were therefore not likely to blame people for misaddressing them, and even often tended to see it as an act of friendliness and politeness. However, this does not mean that the recurrence of these kind of “innocent” experiences which include often having to explain why they are in Flanders, where they come from and when they will go back, may not affect their feeling of belonging in Flanders and that they can have an “eroding” effect on their sense of identity.³⁵ Especially when the participants suspected bad intentions, for instance when the same person repeatedly chose not to address them in Flemish, they felt that they were turned into objects that are denied individuality and they also felt being reduced to a non-white foreigner.

Moreover, while our participants showed understanding for their being seen as foreigners because of their black appearance, this experience nevertheless contradicts the dominant discourse of non-racialism. Several of the participants described this kind of experiences as reinforcing their sense of not belonging and rejection. These experiences might explain why they intuitively do not consider “Flemish” as a label that they can carry. Although they are native speakers of Flemish, holders of Belgian citizenship and have lived most of their life in Flanders, they tend to be “constantly racialized in everyday lives as their non-white bodies are localised to

³⁴ Evert Kets, *Kuifje and Tintin kibbelen in Afrika : de Belgische taalstrijd in Congo* (Rwanda en Burundi: Leuven : Acco, 2009).

³⁵ Gloria Wekker, Cecilia Åsberg et al., *Je hebt een Kleur, maar je bent Nederlands" : Identiteitsformaties van geadopteerden van Kleur.*

a certain geographical origin, connected to a certain ethnicity, nationality, language, religion and race, and sometimes also linked to certain cultural and mental characteristics.”³⁶ Noah phrased this as follows:

Noah: “Black means that I am different, that reveals a lot: that I might have another origin, that I might have other habits, that I might not speak Dutch, that I might not live here. [...] People in Belgium focus on this, that’s a fact. I was once an intern in a hospital, the first day I got there, I knew they looked at me and thought: “So, is that the intern?”... few people expect a black person, and then I always wonder how people will react.”

Another reason for not claiming a Flemish identity is that the sub-state nationalism in Flanders has been strongly affiliated with the political right, a reason why many (left-wing) white Flemings hesitate to identify as Flemish too and rather choose to identify as Belgian. Most participants in the second study had no objections to identifying as Belgian, thereby referring to their legal status as evidence.

Nevertheless, two participants explicitly insisted upon their identity as Flemish. They claimed full Flemish identity, on the basis of their residency in the Flemish region, their Belgian citizenship and their fluent knowledge of the Dutch/Flemish language. Wim, an adoptee from Rwanda, who is politically active and works for a minority rights organization, was one of them. He claimed:

³⁶ Carina Tigervall and Tobias Hübinette, “Adoption with complications: Conversations with adoptees and adoptive parents on everyday racism and ethnic identity,” 504.

Wim: “People who say a person can’t be black and Flemish at the same time, do not understand what being Flemish means.”

Wim’s statement implies that he refuses to accept the ethno-racial discourse surrounding the Flemish identity and coming from the right-wing and neo-fascist political movements in Flanders. Moreover, he lays hold to the authority to affirm himself what being Flemish means, and which for him is not based on ethnicity or race but based on citizenship. Basically, he says that racist discourse is un-Flemish and that the connection it makes between race and being Flemish is based on a misunderstanding of “real” Flemish-ness. Drawing on some sort of *civic* nationalism,³⁷ Wim rejects *ethnic* nationalism but is aware of its important influence on nationalist identity politics in Flanders. He also asserted that he is concerned about a future in which his children, because of their appearance, will be running the risk of being treated as foreigners in their own country and that this concern drives him to be socially active and politically engaged.

Black identity making

In this third section, we will look at and discuss participants’ strategies of self-making related to black identity. We discuss how in spite of the general ideological framework of colour-blindness, both the adoptive parents of the first study and the participants of the second study seemed to connect being black with a sense of community and identity. Some of the participants seemed to deal with the ambiguities in fostering Flemish identity by *de facto* taking on a black identity

³⁷ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship : A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press., 1995); Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

(through choices of style and interests) yet while avoiding to explicitly name it. We will highlight two aspects that appeared in both studies: the comfort that results from interacting with people who share the experience of being “othered” and share the interest in African-American and/or African culture and history.

In the first study, many of the adoptive parents stated that they like to be together with other families with a similar racial make-up as they consider these contacts essential for their children’s well-being and they want their children to know they are not the only adoptee in the world. Daan, an adoptive father of two Ethiopian children described his feelings of enjoyment when watching his oldest son together with another Ethiopian-born adopted child on a trip to a fair together with some other adoptive families.

Daan: “These two little boys then sit together riding a little car on that carousel and they are chattering with each other and I find that it is just very nice that this, that this friendship... if you can call it friendship...between boys of that age, that this [friendship] exists, because this, you know, I think that they can get a lot out of it, at an older age, when their adoption story will start to count. And that’s why I find it nice, that they have a lot of these contacts. I find it is important, this networking. I get a lot out of it myself, but I find this very important for them as well.”

Gatherings with other adopters are often described by adoptive parents as sanctuaries, places where nothing needs to be explained, where people have had similar experiences, and where everyone just understands and no unpleasant questions are asked. These get-togethers can be framed as what Plummer calls “intimacy groups” developing their “own visible and positive

cultures,” locations in which deviant bodies and non-normative families are normalized and have the capacity to shift normative beliefs.³⁸

A black skin colour not only seems to be a basis for feelings of commonality as several participants also made diverse connections between race and culture. Many of the adoptive parents claimed that they try to incorporate their child’s so-called “birth culture” into their lives.³⁹ This “culture work” is part of the new paradigm for transnational adoption counselling, and has been suggested as a “remedy” to the mistakes that have been made in the early decades of transnational adoption when a total “clean break” with the child’s past was propagated. Many of the parents indicated for instance that they like to explore music and food from their children’s birth country, buy coffee table books about the country and participate in various charitable and cultural events where culture from the birth country is performed in various ways. Yet, previous research has found (e.g. Jacobson, 2008; Marre, 2007) that the fact that it is mainly parents of *transracially* adoptive children that tend to engage in this kind of practices, seems to indicate that culture is mobilized to cope with the silence on race.⁴⁰ Adoptive parents also reported practices that *directly* relate to the child’s racial difference, and the fundamentally different treatment and

³⁸ Ken Plummer, “The square of intimate citizenship: Some preliminary proposals,” *Citizenship Studies* 5, no. 3 (2001): 242, 245.

³⁹ Katrien De Graeve, “Festive Gatherings and Culture Work in Flemish-Ethiopian Adoptive Families.”

⁴⁰ Diana Marre, “I want her to learn her language and maintain her culture: Transnational adoptive families’ views of ‘cultural origins,’” in *Race, ethnicity and nation : perspectives from kinship and genetics*, ed. Peter Wade (New York: Berghahn Books., 2007), (pp. 73-93).

products this is supposed to require. They for instance indicated that they had participated in workshops on hair-braiding or had started to frequent African shops to buy beauty products targeted at black consumers.

The parents seemed to consider the exploration of the child's cultural descent and "doing black things" as a way to respect and connect with the adoptee's "essential identity" from which she is assumed to be cut off by her removal from her birth family and nation. On the other hand the practices attest to the parents' implicit awareness of the racial discrimination which their children might face and can thus be seen as a somehow inept attempt to compensate their children from being excluded. However, the culture work has also been exposed as deeply problematic as it tends to conflate culture and race, and is likely to reify difference through a consumerist and often folkloristic idea of a birth culture. Although these practices are engaged in with the sincere intentions of strengthening the black child's sense of identity, they tend to be unable "to go beyond power-denying and superficial engagements with difference" (De Graeve 2015a, p. 529) and reinforce the "social geographies of race" (Frankenberg 1993) that link certain appearances to certain places and cultures by the way of racial markers. Moreover, the culture work is likely to reduce diversity to a mere consumption of ethnic entertainment⁴¹ from which white people, who tend to see themselves as racially and ethnically neutral, are free to pick and choose while constructing their children as essentially connected to their "birth culture" because of their black skin.

⁴¹ Karel Arnaut, Sarah Bracke, et al., "Het gekooide Vlaanderen: Twintig jaar gemist multicultureel debat," in *Een leeuw in een kooi : de grenzen van het multiculturele Vlaanderen*, ed. Karel Arnaut, Sarah Bracke et al., (Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2009), 7-25.

The participants of the second study, who were all raised in predominantly white environments in which they usually meet few other black people, seemed to agree that there was something which is hard to pinpoint but which some referred to as a “black experience.” They indicated that they enjoy meeting other black people and feel a commonality with them, even across national borders. Olga, for instance, said that although each time she met a black person she tended to think: “it’s not because we are both black that we should be friends,” she very often eventually had become friends with the few black people she met while growing up. She concluded:

Olga: “The more black people you get to know, the more you realise that you actually share a lot of things.”

However, the discussions on what a “black experience” means were full of ambiguity. And although many of the participants recounted how important having black friends is for them, many also wanted to downplay the role of race. Caroline, for instance, called the high number of black friends that she has had a coincidence, while simultaneously referring to the comfort of being with people like her:

Caroline: “I have many black and half-black friends. I don’t think it is important, because I think, people are people, and it is the character I feel attracted to. But I feel that friends who also have a foreign origin understand me on many levels and understand many things that my “white” [she makes a quotation marks gesture] friends don’t ... well, they just can’t identify with it and I notice that [...] most of my friends also have another origin. That is not, that is just a coincidence [...] it is just a consolation to know that there are other people like me.”

The participants in the second study also referred to cultural practices to talk about what a black identity could mean. In their stories, often references were made to symbols of the African and African-American struggles, such as to Mandela in South Africa and to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King in the US. All participants shared knowledge of Pan-Africanist leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Aimé Césaire or Marcus Garvey, knowledge that is not part of the history curriculum in Flemish schools and thus was entirely gained by self-study. Noah, for instance, talked about his interest as a teenager in Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement and how it forged his identity in Flanders:

Noah: “The African-American culture had certainly a strong influence on my world view during puberty in the sense that when I was 16 I made a dissertation on Martin Luther King. I was very much interested in this, with what has been going on there [in America] and how we see that again in Belgium. It definitely played a part in how I feel as a black person.”

African-American popular culture and Black/urban youth culture were a second element that was often referred to during the interviews as a shared source of inspiration for young black people’s identity-making. All participants mentioned how they felt a connection with the first black people they saw on TV and most of them said that in African American shows they found things with which they were able to identify. As Caroline put it:

Caroline: “I think the African-American culture played a certain role in my education and development. Because of what you see on TV [...] For me it often was a support and a comfort to see these people, [...] I often caught myself thinking when there were things with African-Americans on TV: ‘Wow, we are so much alike!’ And just the little things I

recognized, like clapping in your hand when you laugh, it is so alike, I can identify with it somehow.”

Some participants recounted how as young teenagers they were fascinated by rap music and found inspiration in hip-hop to forge a cultural identity that fits their self-image. To them, similar to what Clay (2003) observed among African-American youth in the United States, hip-hop seems to function as a safe haven where they can express and share feelings of alienation. However, the participants indicated that their choice of style was not only guided by American hip-hop symbols, but by black symbols from the whole African diaspora. As such, they seem to connect to an imagery of a “Black Atlantic” culture,⁴² that transcends ethnicity and nationality, and is explored not only through music, but also through fashion, hair styles, politics, religion, sports, etc.

Similar to what has been observed among black people elsewhere,⁴³ most participants felt attracted to Black fashion, style and music, and yet they were careful to interpret this taste merely as a reflection of a black “cultural identity” and instead often emphasized the hybrid nature of these cultural expressions. The participants’ views on black identity come close to what has been called a “black identity without ethnicity.”⁴⁴ Tina rejected the assumption that her

⁴² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

⁴³ Pap Ndiaye, *La Condition noire: Essai sur une minorité française* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2009); Livio Sansone, *Blackness Without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁴⁴ Livio Sansone, *Blackness Without Ethnicity*.

preference for going out to clubs playing “Black music” and frequented by a culturally and racially mixed crowd could be a reflection of “her Black culture”. Most participants tended to think of being black as being part of a “community of experience”, in which African and Afro-diasporic cultures serve to deliver symbols for a hybrid identity going beyond a fixed ethnicity.⁴⁵

Concluding remarks

In this article, we juxtaposed the narratives of white parents of black children and Flemish native speakers who self-identify as Afro-descendants to analyse and shed light upon the complexities of black identity-making and belonging in contemporary multicultural and colour-blind Flanders. Among both groups we found that the problem of racialization and racial discrimination was a source of great concern, and yet it was simultaneously downplayed.

The white adoptive parents worried about racism, and how it could affect their children, but at the same time they argued that in their closest environment it was not a big issue. Nevertheless, they considered “cultural work” and meeting with other adoptive families as important in strengthening their children and in supporting their children’s healthy self-image and identity formation. The black Flemish interviewees all told about experiences of both unconscious racialization and intentional racism, and with the former being the most difficult to pinpoint yet also the hardest to digest, as this kind of racialization often derives from those who are close to themselves such as friends, partners and family members. The participants showed a great deal of readiness to excuse racializing comments, yet at the same time they indicated that they felt hurt by them and that they experienced them as “eroding” their sense of belonging to Flanders. In spite of their fluency in Flemish language and culture, few of the black participants

⁴⁵ Ibid.

considered “Fleming” an identity that they could fully claim. Furthermore, their embrace of “black” identity also seemed to be quite ambiguous, as they seemed to want to simultaneously downplay the role of race in their lives and emphasize blackness more as a marker of transnational and transcultural solidarity.

By bringing the interviews from the two participant groups together as we have done in this article it becomes evident that in spite of the dominant colour-blind discourse the significance of race is still very much present in contemporary Flanders. However, the general unease of talking about race and even the lack of an adequate vocabulary to describe racial difference hamper both white and non-white people’s ability to discuss racism, racialisation and racial discrimination in today’s Flanders. What Moore once argued about gender stereotypes⁴⁶ seem to hold true for racial stereotypes and colonial discourses as well: while “so few people are prepared to acknowledge that they support or believe in them,” racialization is something in which people unconsciously invest in heavily to maintain the existing power relations.⁴⁷ It therefore seems more urgent than ever to take race seriously and to unpack, name and start to discuss the complex ways in which it continues to permeate social processes and shape experiences of oppression and privilege. Only by acknowledging that race is still deeply ingrained and persistent in the social fabric of our contemporary society, and try to understand

⁴⁶ Henrietta L. Moore, *A Passion for Difference : Essays in Anthropology and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity press., 1995), 51.

⁴⁷ Bambi Ceuppens and Sarah De Mul, “De vergeten Congolees. Kolonialisme, postkolonialisme and multiculturalisme in Vlaanderen.”

the ways in which it (re)produces inequalities, we can start to profoundly rethink identity and belonging in Flanders.

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