Imageries of family and nation: A comparative analysis of transnational adoption and care for unaccompanied minors in Belgium

Katrien De Graeve and Christof Bex
Ghent University, Belgium

Abstract

Drawing on empirical research completed in Belgium, this article presents a comparative analysis of the care regimes for two categories of children: transnational adoptees and unaccompanied minors. Although state immigration policies consider the two groups of minors as humanitarian exceptions that require preferential treatment, the kind of humanitarian help and social investment they are believed to deserve differs dramatically. Ideologies of relational exclusivity and fixed belonging differently structure the investment of care that the two groups are believed to need, dependent on their ability to be read as freestanding, cultureless individuals, assimilable to the host nation.

Although transnational adoptive families and relations in the context of care for un-accompanied minors both involve migration and are grounded in a rhetoric of help to 'children in need', in public discourse and policy their support is very differently conceptualized. By comparing dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses and practices in transnational adoption and unaccompanied minors' care and analysing values and norms that shape both care relations, this article seeks to 'shake up' the frames of reference in which both groups of minors are mapped. The differences and similarities in the ways values and practices of care are interwoven with emotions and politics of national

---

Corresponding author:
Katrien De Graeve, Centre for Research on Culture and Gender, Department of Languages and Cultures, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Ghent University, Rozier 44, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.
Email: Katrien.DeGraeve@UGent.be

and familial belonging make visible the moral contradictions that undergird current constructions of responsibilities towards people in need and uncover the ways in which moral and humanitarian discourses on children's needs are intertwined with existing power structures and the interests of the most powerful economic and social groups.

Drawing on recently emerging literature that compares transnational adoption with other types of migration (Ballucci and Dorow, 2014; De Graeve, 2015b; Leinaweaver, 2013; Leiter et al., 2006; Stryker and Yngvesson, 2013; Van Wichelen, 2015) and on recent work on exceptionalism in European immigration policies (Fassin, 2001, 2005; Judge, 2010; Malkki, 1995; Nyers, 2006; Pupavac, 2008), we explore the care for the two groups of minors (1) as being part of immigration policy and (2) as concerning humanitarian exceptions within this immigration policy. We draw on Howell's (2006) concept of 'kinning' to call attention to the close relationship between family and nation and the intricate interplay between views on immigrant integration, child development ideologies that consider children as malleable cultural beings 'in the making' and beliefs in an essential national identity, linked to physical appearance. Ideologies of relational exclusivity and fixed belonging are differently deployed, dependent on the extent to which the minors can be imagined as 'autonomous non-social individuals' ready to be 'brought into a significant and permanent relation' to the host nation (Howell, 2006: 8), which turns them into either a blessing or a burden to the host society. By juxtaposing the narratives that cluster around the two groups of minors, we aim to extend our understanding of the joint operation of family ideologies, 'White' privilege and immigrant assimilation in the transnational care for children.

Methods

This article draws on two empirical studies, carried out in the predominantly Flemish-speaking northern part of Belgium.[1] The first study (2008–2012) examined dominant discourses in transnational adoption through participant observation during adoptive parents' gatherings, 60 in-depth interviews with adoptive parents and professionals and analysis of media coverage and policy documents. The second is an on-going study (2013–2016) on guardianships and foster care of unaccompanied minors in Belgium. For this study, in-depth interviews have been conducted with 13 guardians, 2 foster parents of unaccompanied minors and 12 young adults who have come to Belgium as unaccompanied minors, supplemented with analysis of newspaper reports and policy documents concerning unaccompanied minors. All interviews have been audio-recorded, fully transcribed and analysed, using a social constructivist and critical approach, exploring the participants' interpretation of their own experiences while simultaneously looking at the wider contexts and ideological frameworks in which they are implicated (Hastrup, 1995).

'Figurations' of adoptees and unaccompanied minors

Castañeda (2002: 3) uses the term 'figuration' to encompass the 'domains of practice and significance' that are built into conceptualizations of children. She argues that the term enables us to understand how the child is constituted '*as* a figure', but that it can also grasp the various bodies and worlds that this figure produces. In this section, we aim to

inquire into the divergent child's figurations in both transnational adoption and the reception of unaccompanied minors. We argue that both conflicting and complementary ideas play an important role in the divergence of figurations. First is the view of children as (cultural) beings in the making that portrays children as a tabula rasa on which culture can be written. Second is the ideology of national substance (Leinaweaver, 2013) which regards national identity as an essence, intricately linked with a wide range of other, often less palpable identity markers, such as 'race' and culture. It is the adoptees' and unaccompanied minors' specific intersectional positioning between age, gender, and agency that seems to shape the way in which the interplay between malleability and substance is played out. In what follows, we try to disentangle this complex knot of factors in both groups of children.

The first category of minors in this study comprises people who have migrated to Belgium through transnational adoption (for more elaboration on Belgian context and policy, see De Graeve, 2015b). It concerns a couple of 100 children per year, coming from a variety of different countries, yet with Ethiopia, China and Kazakhstan as the most popular 'sending' countries the last 8 years. What is remarkable is that 76.68% of children adopted from abroad to Belgium in the period from 2005 to 2014 were younger than 4 years.[2] Prospective adoptive parents usually prefer to adopt babies or young children because they assume that the children's lack of memories of their pre-adoption life and their only brief socialization in a foreign language and culture make adaptation to the new family and nation easier. Through a series of 'legal fictions', orphaned children, but also children who still have living biological parents are made 'adoptable', that is, transformed into *freestanding* children (Yngvesson, 2007: 569) who can be uncoupled from their birth country and culture. They seem to figure as 'the ultimate liberal subject' (Yngvesson, 2012: 330), a 'cultureless' blank slate in which the language and culture of the new family and nation can be inscribed.

Until the Flemish Central Authority on Adoption prohibited sex preference for children in 2008, more adoptive parents showed a preference not only for babies, but more specifically for baby girls. Vera, a mother of a biological son, a stepson and an adopted daughter claimed during an interview,

> I always wanted a daughter. And I have had a stillborn girl. Moreover, with two sons, it's kind of natural you want a girl. And rumours are circulating that there are more problems with boys than with girls, and that boys are more easily discriminated against. These rumours are circulating, that's why people ask girls. Don't know if this is justified.[3]

This quote demonstrates how adoptive parents' justifications for preferring a girl or a boy can be multi-layered, but are nevertheless informed by prevalent ideas of how intersections of race and gender shape adoptees' integration and reception in families and in the wider society.

It also shows that a central factor in adoption is not so much the need of children, but the family projects of prospective adopters and *their* best interests (we return to this point in the next section). However, shrinking markets of available 'adoptable' children has made adopters shift the boundaries of which children they consider compatible with their family building projects, which has produced a more complicated picture. There has

been an increase in adoptions of children between 6 and 12 years, joint sibling adoptions and adoptions of children with minor or more severe disabilities (37% of the children who have been transnationally adopted in Flanders in 2013 were defined as having 'special needs').[4] Prospective parents may relax their demands, in hopes that they will move up in the long waiting list of adopters competing for a decreasing number of adoptable, healthy infants. But being prepared to adopt older or disabled children also better fits a rhetoric that depicts adoption as a humanitarian way to help children who otherwise would be thrown back into institutional care or be deprived of adequate medical treatment.

Moreover, the choice for adopting older children is also congruous with a discourse that challenges notions of babies, and foundling babies in particular, as the ideal adoptees. Adoption professionals, such as social workers and psychologists involved in the preparation and support of adoptive families, often warn against what they see as naïve misconceptions about adopting babies. Babies, they assert, are not the blank slates adoptive parents would want them to be, but embody individual and collective histories. They believe that the lack of any conscious memory of, and/or any information about, the pre-adoption past (as is the case with foundlings) might render rearing even more difficult. This new emphasis in current professional discourses has been induced by testimonies of adult adoptees worldwide detailing painful identity struggles generated by the erasure of their blood ties in a cultural context that highly values blood relations and authentic national origins (Oparah et al., 2006; Yngvesson and Mahoney, 2000).

Similarly, present-day expert discourses highlight the advantages of joint sibling adoption, emphasizing the importance of maintained kinship bonds and the knowledge about the past that the older sibling(s) might have for their own and their younger siblings' healthy development. An ideological framework that considers access to knowledge about one's biological kin and 'roots' essential for self-understanding and mental health turns older children's memories and understanding of their past into a potential asset, something that might stimulate their smooth integration in the new family and nation. Moreover, maintaining ties between siblings seems easier and less threatening to the nuclear family model than keeping contact with birth parents, the latter requiring giving up the doctrine of exclusive parenthood.

The role of national substance and kinship bonds is very differently conceptualized in discourses and practices on the second category of minors in this study. Belgium receives around 2200 new unaccompanied minors per year, from a wide variety of countries, but mainly from Afghanistan, Morocco, Guinea, Algeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (for more elaboration on Belgian context and policy, see De Graeve, 2015a).[5] These children arrive in Belgium alone (unaccompanied by their legal representatives) or are left behind in the country by migrating parents who, for instance, have been refused asylum. Some of these children have fled their countries to escape war, political unrest or human rights violations; others were victims of human trafficking for sexual or other forms of exploitation, while others travelled to Belgium to escape conditions of poverty.

The majority of them are male teenagers, having lived for several years in a foreign country, language and culture, separated from but possibly with continued duties towards birth kin. This intersectional positioning seems to fit less easily into the ideal of the blank

slate immigrant, who can be uncoupled from her familial and cultural past and made freestanding. The past experiences of unaccompanied minors, their cultural and social capital and knowledge about their 'roots' are less likely to be read as potential assets that can strengthen their sense of identity, but are rather seen as unbridgeable differences. In contrast to adoptees, who are miraculously transformed into treasured subjects (Eng, 2003: 7) and largely cleared from the immigrant status, unaccompanied minors are first and foremost defined as (potentially unwelcome) immigrants and are subject to the repressive enforcement of asylum and immigration rules that often stand in uneasy tension with international and national instruments designed for the care for 'children in need' (Senovilla Hernández and Touzenis, 2010: xiii).

With a majority of them aged between 16 and 18 years (62.08% in 2012), unaccompanied minors are legally defined as minors, but at the same time situated in the grey zone of adolescence and transition to adulthood. The age claims of these 'borderline adults' have become the site of medical investigations by immigration authorities, which aim to expose false claimants of child protection policies (for critiques of age estimations, see, for example, Smith and Brownlees, 2011). Furthermore, stereotypes of male 'non-White' adolescents, loitering around in groups on the streets (typically called '*hangjongeren*' or hang-around youth) and thought to be particularly prone to violent and criminal behaviours, leave them in an ambivalent position. While they are part of the category of vulnerable minors, entitled to protection and care, they also evoke sentiments of aversion and fear.

Judge (2010: 12) explains how the reliance on the discourse of children's rights has worked to marginalize young refugee men in the United Kingdom. Drawing on Nyers' (2006) and Fassin's (2001) biopolitical critique of humanitarianism, she shows how male adolescents are less easily absorbed within the gendered images of vulnerability attributed to 'authentic refugeeness'. Quite the contrary, racialized representations and images of potent, masculine bodies tend to situate them in a negative space of the 'threatening criminal' (Judge, 2010: 8), and their relatively high numbers may even cause fears for uncontrolled floods of foreigners.

Moreover, their ability to be read as grievable victims desperately in need of Western help is reduced due to the agency they exerted in initiating and shaping their migration. In contrast to adoptees who seldom have had any say in the adoption decision and, when adopted at an early age, even have no memories of the trip that brought them to Belgium, many of the unaccompanied minors have travelled independently, not uncommonly under dangerous or uncomfortable circumstances. Adoptees' immigration, portrayed as both a child protection measure for innocent, docile victims waiting to be rescued and a reproductive option for Belgian citizens, controlled and contained by the Belgian authorities, is even no longer considered as immigration. Readings of the trajectories of the unaccompanied minors, on the contrary, tend to emphasize uncontrollability, both of numbers and legitimacy.

Furthermore, the (assumed) traumas due to separation, loss, uncertainty and unsafe travel at an age which, according to psychological developmental theory, is a particularly vulnerable stage in life (see also Wernesjö, 2012) tend to place unaccompanied minors outside the normal. While these pathologizing representations might produce discourses and actions of compassion, it may also serve to exoticize the minors involved and emphasize

the impossibility of their full integration. Finally, the politics of exceptionalism also denies them political subjecthood (see also Stretmo, 2014). Foregrounding their young age as the reason for protection obscures their possible asylum claims or the legitimacy of their attempt to escape from unfavourable conditions.

Regimes of care

In the previous section, we have discussed the different intersectional positioning and figurations of adoptees and unaccompanied minors. In this section, we investigate their very different trajectories of care, governed by different administrative, legal and institutional frameworks. While both groups are generally considered as particularly vulnerable children, in a situation that is believed to be 'out of bounds' (Wernesjö, 2012), outside the confines of family and nation, the humanitarian and moral responses they evoke seem to be heavily dependent on their ability to be figured as freestanding and subsequently absorbable into the 'us', 'here' and 'now'. This ability shapes the state's use of the 'child's best interest' rhetoric, emphasizing either the child's essential belonging to her birth family and nation or her need of being incorporated into the host family and nation, as such serving the double purpose of immigration control and reproduction of the neoliberal family model (Ballucci and Dorow, 2014).

The care regime for adoptees is based on the nuclear family model, imagining the alleged freestanding adoptees as in need of substitute families, which, through the process of 'kinning' (Howell, 2006), facilitate their assimilation and belonging to the nation-state. Growing up 'in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding' is a child's right according to The Hague Convention on Intercountry adoption, something a child is believed to need 'for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality'.[6] 'Adoptable children' are perceived to have lost this suitable environment, and adoption into a Western family is presented as an appropriate humanitarian response to this loss.

However, despite a childcare rhetoric, it is debatable that the child's well-being is the main driving force behind the transnational adoption industry (Nelson, 2006). The 2014–2019 policy document of Jo Vandeurzen, the Flemish minister for Welfare, Public Health and Family, fuels this doubt. Although Belgium has ratified the Hague convention, which urges states 'as a matter of priority' to take 'appropriate measures to enable the child to remain in the care of his or her family of origin', the policy statement is expressed as follows:[7]

> Candidate adopters who want to adopt a child from abroad *must* be able to rely on sufficient, well-functioning and *trustworthy* adoption channels. Therefore, we invest in the proactive search for new adoption opportunities abroad and the systematic evaluation, adjusting and strengthening of current collaborations. In cooperation with the Adoption Support Centre (*Steunpunt Adoptie*), we also support adoptees who want to search for their roots.[8] (Italics our own)

The use of the word *must* shows that the Flemish government seems to consider the continued supply of adoptable children as a right that citizens hold, irrespective of whether transnational adoption is in the child's (or her birth family's) best interest or not. The

document clearly indicates that the government prioritizes the reproductive rights of its citizens, while the children's and birth family's rights are condensed into the word 'trustworthy', a qualifier that seems to pass the buck of moral responsibility to the adoption agencies and sending countries. Moreover, the lack of any concrete plans to prevent abuse, abduction or the falsification of records or to search for alternatives in order to avoid transnational adoptions shows an underlying ethnocentric belief that affluent families in Western democracies are healthier homes for children anyhow (Van Wichelen, 2015). In addition, by stating that policy aims to support the adoptees' search for 'roots', the document naturalizes the severing of ties with birth families in transnational adoption and turns the adult adoptees' loss and subsequent difficult quest for their origins into an inevitable aspect of (transnational) adoption, the unavoidable cost of their being 'saved' by Western families.

Furthermore, the government's intention to maintain and stimulate the adoption of foreign children to Belgium is remarkable in light of the restrictive policing of immigrants in general and unaccompanied minors in particular. Policy regarding unaccompanied minors primarily aims to discourage in-migration and encourage return. As adoptees are valued for sentimental reasons, for their ability to 'complete' families (Yngvesson, 2004), Belgian policies encourage their 'saving' and incorporation into our society. The authorities actively participate in the search for new children and aim to increase their numbers, even when it concerns sick and disabled children whose medical needs will raise the costs of health services. While not denouncing the humanitarian concern for disabled children, it is fair to say that a double moral standard prevails in immigration policy. While the immigration of young (disabled) foreign bodies is welcomed due to their ability to fulfil middle-class desires to form families, the immigration of unaccompanied minors is defined as a social problem that must be contained and discouraged.

The care for unaccompanied minors occurs at the intersection of immigration policy and the state's obligation to protect children on its territory (Senovilla Hernández and Touzenis, 2010: xiii). It is seen as domestic child welfare work, which aims at meeting minors' fundamental rights and basic needs for protection and guidance in the context of a restrictive immigration policy. What is considered basic needs is, in contrast to the emotionally laden interpretation of transnational adoption, expressed in much more bureaucratic actions and impersonal arrangements. For unaccompanied minors, being cared for in a family environment and the development of significant interpersonal care relationships are not considered primary needs and sometimes even denounced as undesirable. François, for instance, who has been the guardian of 13 pupils over a period of 4 years, expressed his feelings of ambiguity regarding the intense care relationship between one of his teenage pupils and his foster parents, in light of the boy's impending deportation:

> They are intellectuals, wonderful people. They have had three children, who have left the house, so they have plenty of space. They're very nice people. […] The boy is very independent; he rides his bike through the city, and their relationship is very good, it works very well. […] They have been integrating him very much, and I wonder if not too much. Is this what is supposed to happen? What if he has to go back to his country and now he's in that … not a rich family, but still … affluent. But he's immensely lucky, and he knows, he's told them that he's grateful. But that's an exception. And I wonder: Isn't that too good?

The current policy concerning unaccompanied minors seems to oscillate between pity and control (Fassin, 2005: 366) and can be described as what Ticktin (2011: 5) calls 'a form of "armed love"', combining the moral imperative to act with practices of violence and containment. After 'the Tabitha case', Belgium's conviction by the European court of Human rights for detaining for nearly 2 months a 5-year-old girl and sending her back to the DRC unaccompanied, Belgium introduced a series of legal provisions regulating the reception and protection of unaccompanied minors (Bhabha, 2009: 432; Kanics and Senovilla Hernández, 2010: 7), including a guardianship system. All unaccompanied minors are now allocated a guardian to advise them on procedural issues and to act as a legal representative in matters of social well-being, education, mental and physical health, and accommodation. Accommodation is usually provided in institutional care homes or in autonomous living arrangements and less likely in foster families. Minors commonly have to move from one facility to another, which involves changing schools and adapting to new contexts and (in some cases) new language.

The discontinuity of carers and friends hampers the development of meaningful and longstanding care relationships, a reality that seems to stand in huge contrast to the 'family environment' and 'atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding' that the Hague Convention on Adoption considers to be a child's right. Policy and guidelines for caregivers and guardians focus on streamlining, professionalism, professional distance and equal treatment and discourage close ties between minors and their caregivers, for instance, by prohibiting guardians to give gifts or take the minors to their homes. Bart, an employee-guardian, voiced his objections to close relationships between guardians and their pupils as follows:

> When a minor tells me: 'you are my Belgian dad', then I know I'm not on the right track. I don't want him to call me daddy, cause I'm *not* his daddy. He has only *one* daddy. And wherever his dad is, in his country of origin, or he has died, it is *he* who is the father. So *I* don't want to be seen as the boy's father.

Such a claim would cause some raising of eyebrows if it was used in the context of adoption, where the separation of the child from the biological parents is believed to require substitution. The claim that unaccompanied minors can only have one father, and thus the presumed impossibility of substituting their biological care relationships (or complementing them) with other, long-lasting and kin-like relationships, illustrates how the unaccompanied minors' biological ties, in contrast to adoptees' relation to birth kin, are conceptualized as much more deeply rooted and essential.

It must be kept in mind that Bart makes his claim in his position of a guardian, which entails the merely legal representation of the minor, not the provision of emotional support or childcare. Nevertheless, the argument he uses for avoiding too close a relationship with his pupils seems to imply that his claim is not only valid with respect to guardians but also with respect to all the caregivers of unaccompanied minors. This observation is in line with Stretmo's findings in her study of the reception of unaccompanied minors in Norway and Sweden (2014), which show that despite the 'apparatus of well-functioning and practical arrangements', no one of the many caregivers and professionals who are involved in the lives of unaccompanied minors seem to have the responsibility to meet

the emotional needs of the minors, even after they have been granted permanent residency (Stretmo, 2014: 244).[9] The middle-class parenting ideologies that define the biological nuclear family as the exclusive site of close affectional bonds and deeply emotional involvement restrict the way care is imagined and practised.

Nevertheless, despite the structural barriers that hamper the development of durable and meaningful care relationships, some of the unaccompanied minors are able to build strong ties with social workers, guardians or volunteers. These ties were often described by the former unaccompanied minors as meaningful and positively affecting their feelings of belonging and were sometimes even qualified as 'kin-like'. Obaidullah, for instance, an 18-year-old from Afghanistan, who since his arrival 2 years ago has lived in three different cities and accommodations, and now lives independently, recounted,

> I got a lot of support from a volunteer, named Suzanne. She not only helps me, she also helps other youngsters who live here alone in X [name city]. She helps me with school work. I think that's so nice. Every week she comes to see me, or she calls: 'how are you doing?' She's not paid for doing this, she's a volunteer. Last year she helped me and paid for my metro pass. That's so nice, she's always ready to help and give support to people who have nothing or can do nothing. […] It feels as if she's my mum. For example, the day before yesterday I had a headache, and yesterday she called me to ask how I was. That is … it doesn't take away my headache, but it gives me a feeling … there is someone who asks.

Mariam, who 10 years ago came to Belgium from Guinea as a 15-year-old, described how the commitment of Ellen, her guardian, extended far beyond the guardian's job description:

> She was a bit like a mum to me, she was there for me. […] I was really happy that she said that I was always welcome. That meant a lot to me. She didn't have to do that, but, at that time, I really needed that, that someone said: 'I accept you, and you can come to me'. I came here [in Belgium], and I didn't know anyone. Ellen was much more than a guardian, she introduced me to her parents, to her family. A lot has happened, it wasn't merely a guardianship, I became part of her family.

The participants' testimonies show that they define care as including a lot more than the meeting of basic needs. While all the participants confirmed that as unaccompanied minors in Belgium they were provided with enough food, clothes, health care and reasonable quality accommodation, it is the emotional involvement and affection of caregivers that they seem to consider most important.

Imageries of family and nation

The conceptual and actual divisions between the two groups of minors, but also their zones of overlap, are telling about the ways in which imageries of the family and the nation intersect. In this section, we try to unravel the nexus of family ideologies, White privilege and conceptions of immigrant assimilation that produce paradoxical tensions in decisions of which children deserve what kind of committed action (see also Van Wichelen, 2015).

Adoptees' usually life-long entry into White, middle-class, 'as-if' biological families (Modell, 1994) implies that they inherit their adoptive parents' 'knapsack of white privilege' (McIntosh, 2000) in terms of class, socio-economic security, financial means, education and living conditions. Their assimilation into the nation is believed to occur automatically through the process of 'kinning', which is the transformation of the child into a relational person, anchored in affective and cultural structures (Howell, 2006; Van Wichelen, 2015).

Leinaweaver (2013: 27) suggests that the preference for young children in transnational adoption should be seen as an articulation of prospective adopters' search for an ideal migrant. She shows in her juxtaposition of different types of migration between Peru and Spain that adoptive parents' preference for infants is exemplary of the expectations imposed on immigrants in European countries and the limits to the difference citizens of these countries are willing to adapt to. Infants' assumed ability to be completely absorbed in the host family and nation turns them into ideal immigrants within imageries that equate interculturality and immigrant integration with cultural assimilation. Paul and Saskia, the adoptive parents of three children from Ethiopia, phrased this view as follows:

Paul: They [the adoptive children] have our culture, the way of doing, playing, of relations … while many Moroccan and Turkish kids …

Saskia: … but it's also because of the fact that they [the Moroccan and Turkish kids] are different in a way and that they have another culture, that they manifest themselves through that culture … So, part of the racism has to do with that, while they [the adoptive children] probably will also have to deal with it but … Someone, even if he is half a racist, he must see that they're no … outsiders.

By stating that their adoptive children have 'our culture', they distance their children from 'Moroccan' and 'Turkish' kids, who might be physically White and might have been born in Belgium, but are believed to 'manifest themselves' through 'another culture'. Their justification of racism in relation to cultural difference and their implicit suggestion that racism is partly the immigrants' responsibility illuminates, as Leinaweaver (2013: 22) states, how 'the burden is on the migrant to acculturate', not on the ethnic majority 'to learn to understand and value difference'. Such a view turns the perfectly assimilated transnational adoptee into a symbol of 'interethnic harmony' and 'global and postmodern cosmopolitanism' (Hübinette, 2006: 139), believed to achieve the joined aims of embracing diversity while maintaining cultural coherence (see also Yngvesson, 2012).

Consequently, while adoptees are incorporated in middle to higher class White families, they seem only assimilable to these families on the condition of abandoning prior family and cultural ties. They are supposed to 'consolidate the *affective* boundaries of the white, heteronormative middle-class nuclear family' (Eng, 2010: 109, italics in original), and when they fail to do so, their non-conformity to parents' conceptualizations of nuclear family is rendered pathological by biomedical discourses that legitimize the category of family life and offer therapies for disciplining children 'to become emotional assets in the home' (Stryker, 2010: 12).

While the erasure of adoptees' cultural difference and family ties allows their transformation into valuable assets for White, middle-class families – and vice versa – discourses on the right to belong of unaccompanied minors seem to revolve around emotional and humanitarian value as well. The youngsters' embedding in strong care relationships may even cause public outcry when the government expels them from the country once they turn 18 years. Think, for instance, of the highly publicized case of Scott Manyo, a young man who arrived in Belgium from Cameroon in 2008 as a 15-year-old (yet his age was disputed by the authorities) and received a deportation order in 2012. Protesters used his 'perfect integration' in Belgian society, proved by his life in a Belgian foster family and his popularity as a local scouts leader, as arguments to call his deportation morally perverse. The care of his White foster parents and his embedding in a social network (school, scouts, friends) seem to have ascribed his body with value. Central in the claims for support was not the validity of his asylum claims, but his being integrated in Belgian society, measured in terms of his closeness to White, middle-class people and values, on the one hand, and his loss of ties with his birth family and culture, on the other.

This and similar cases have elicited public debate between advocates of 'child amnesty' and proponents of 'return trajectories', both positions appealing to humanitarian sentiments. The proponents of child amnesty call for the right of unaccompanied minors to stay in the country permanently on the basis of children's rights. The proponents of assisted return for minors, on the contrary, plead for quicker procedures and persuading minors to step into return programmes. Bart, an employee-guardian, showed himself a fierce defender of the latter position:

> We need some kind of return trajectory. It shouldn't be like, as has long been the case, 'until you're eighteen you're safe here'. That's giving them the wrong message. These kids begin to integrate, they forge ties, they study, they might have a god parent here or live in a family, and then we arrive at the emotional level. And when they turn eighteen, we say: 'Sorry, but we are arresting you and sending you back'. But it's not because we can't send them back before they turn eighteen that we can't develop a return policy for minors.

Or how avoiding the minors entering into relations that reach an 'emotional level' and sending them back to their countries of origin are constructed as humane measures, that are even in the children's best interest.

Concluding remarks

We have compared the care for transnational adoptees and unaccompanied minors in Belgium, two groups of minors who have immigrated from foreign countries and are (considered) deprived of or separated from the control, protection and care of their biological parents or other legal representatives. These two groups of 'abandoned' immature bodies are generally seen as exceptionally vulnerable and therefore exacting our moral response. National and international child protection laws and child welfare policies provide them with special privileges and benefits, protecting them from the exclusionary logics of immigration policies. Both groups come to represent, however in very different ways, a 'humanitarian exception' (Ticktin, 2011: 5) within the biopolitical logic and humanitarian rationale of current family and immigration policies and discourses on who

has the right to belong in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Chimni, 2000; Fassin, 2001; Nyers, 2006; Ticktin, 2011). The focus on the suffering bodies of abandoned minors removes the humanitarian response from the political sphere and converts it into a moral imperative to relieve suffering, a sheer matter of compassion (see also Fassin, 2005).

Moreover, analysing transnational adoption and the care for unaccompanied minors in conjunction with one another serves to expose the moral contradictions that structure the de-politicized division of the minors in two distinct institutional, administrative and legal categories. Despite the similarities between the two groups of minors, the moral legitimacy of their suffering is differently evaluated; they are differently categorized and placed in distinctive regimes of care (Ticktin, 2011: 3). The comparison of the two groups of children might open up possibilities to dismantle these boundaries. The joint analysis of the two different pathways of minors can serve to question the 'naturalness' of both and open up space for thinking about their care in radically different and more inclusive ways. It may require us to abandon the Western ethnocentric parent-driven perspectives that regulate the politics of clean-break and exclusive nuclear family creation in transnational adoption, to discard the privileging of Western parental rights and even to give up the family model altogether (see also Yngvesson, 2013). It may also need to destabilize the naturalized rhetoric of repatriation policies, assimilationist national ideologies and exclusionary humanitarianism that guides the care for unaccompanied minors. Yet, it might create a space in which the transnational care for children can be reconsidered from scratch.

Acknowledgements

Funding

Notes

1. Both studies have been carried out by the first author, with research assistance from the second author in the second study.
2. Similar to the trends in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, there has been a decline in the number of transnational adoptions to Belgium from an average yearly number of around 400 to 260 in 2011 and only 177 in 2013. See http://statbel.fgov.be/nl/modules/publications/statistieques/bevolking/downloads/bevolking_-_adopties_in_belgie.jsp and http://justitie.belgium.be/nl/themas_en_dossiers/kinderen_en_jongeren/adoptie/statistieken/globale_statistieken/ (accessed 23 February 2015).
3. All participants' names are pseudonyms. Excerpts are translated from Dutch by the authors.
4. 'Special needs' children include children older than 6 years, with medical or behavioural problems, developmentally retarded children, children from abusive situations or sibling

adoptions; see http://www.kindengezin.be/img/activiteitenverslag-vlaams-centrum-voor-adoptie-2013.pdf (assessed 26 January 2015), p. 30.

5. The average number of newcomers between 2006 and 2012 was 2235; see http://justitie.belgium.be/nl/themas_en_dossiers/kinderen_en_jongeren/niet-begeleide_minderjarige_vreemdelingen/ (assessed 23 February 2015).

6. Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption; see http://www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=conventions.text&cid=69 (accessed 23 February 2014).

7. See Note 6.

8. See http://www.vlaanderen.be/nl/publicaties/detail/beleidsnota-2014-2019-welzijn-volksgezondheid-en-gezin (assessed 15 December 2014), p. 45. Translated from Dutch by the authors.

9. However, our research shows that some caregivers tend to differentiate between minors who have good chances to get a permanent residency and those who, for example, come from countries that are on the 'safe countries' list. Caregivers not only seem to do less efforts to stimulate integration of the latter group, they often also tend to keep more emotional distance.

References

Ballucci D and Dorow S (2014) Constructing childhood at the boundaries of the nation: Chinese adoptee and refugee cases in Canada. *Childhood* 21(1): 39–55.

Bhabha J (2009) Arendt's children: Do today's migrant children have a right to have rights? *Human Rights Quarterly* 31(2): 410–451.

Castañeda C (2002) *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Chimni BS (2000) Globalization, humanitarianism and the erosion of refugee protection. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13(3): 243–263.

De Graeve K (2015a) Classed landscapes of care and belonging: Guardianships of unaccompanied minors. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. Epub ahead of print 11 August 2015: DOI: 10.1093/jrs/fev011.

De Graeve K (2015b) 'They have our culture': Negotiating migration in Belgian–Ethiopian transnational adoption. *Ethnos* 80(1): 71–90.

Eng DL (2003) Transnational adoption and queer diasporas. *Social Text* 21(3): 1–37.

Eng DL (2010) *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fassin D (2001) The biopolitics of otherness: Undocumented foreigners and racial discrimination in French public debate. *Anthropology Today* 17(1): 3–7.

Fassin D (2005) Compassion and repression: The moral economy of immigration policies in France. *Cultural Anthropology* 20(3): 362–387.

Hastrup (1995) *A Passage to Anthropology: Between Experience and Theory*. New York: Routledge.

Howell S (2006) *The Kinning of Foreigners: Transnational Adoption in a Global Perspective*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Hübinette T (2006) From orphan trains to babylifts: Colonial trafficking, empire building, and social engineering. In: Trenka JJ, Sudbury J and Shin SY (eds) *Outsiders within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, pp. 139–149.

Judge R (2010) *Refugee Advocacy and the Biopolitics of Asylum in Britain*. Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre.

Kanics J and Senovilla Hernández D (2010) Protected or merely tolerated? Models of reception and regularization of unaccompanied and separated children in Europe. In: Kanics J, Senovilla

Hernández D and Touzenis K (eds) *Migrating Alone: Unaccompanied and Separated Children's Migration to Europe*. Paris: Unesco Pub., pp. 3–20.

Leinaweaver JB (2013) *Adoptive Migration: Raising Latinos in Spain*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Leiter V, McDonald JL and Jacobson HT (2006) Challenges to children's independent citizenship: Immigration, family and the state. *Childhood* 13(1): 11–27.

McIntosh P (2000) White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies. In: Disch E (ed.) *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, pp. 70–80.

Malkki LH (1995) Refugees and exile: From 'refugee studies' to the national order of things. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 495–523.

Modell JS (1994) *Kinship with Strangers: Adoption and Interpretations of Kinship in American Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Nelson KP (2006) Shopping for children in the international marketplace. In: Trenka JJ, Sudbury J and Shin SY (eds) *Outsiders within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, pp. 89–104.

Nyers P (2006) *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*. London: Routledge.

Oparah JC, Shin SY and Trenka JJ (eds) (2006) *Outsiders within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, pp. 1–15.

Pupavac V (2008) Refugee advocacy, traumatic representations and political disenchantment. *Government and Opposition* 43(2): 270–292.

Senovilla Hernández D and Touzenis K (2010) Introduction. In: Kanics J, Senovilla Hernández D and Touzenis K (eds) *Migrating Alone: Unaccompanied and Separated Children's Migration to Europe*. Paris: Unesco Pub., pp. xiii–xvii.

Smith T and Brownlees L (2011) *Age Assessment Practice: A Literature Review & Annotated Bibliography*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund.

Stretmo L (2014) *Governing the Unaccompanied Child – Media, Policy and Practice*. Göteborg: Göteborgs Universitet.

Stryker R (2010) *The Road to Evergreen: Adoption, Attachment Therapy, and the Promise of Family*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Stryker R and Yngvesson B (2013) Fixity and fluidity – Circulations, children, and childhood. *Childhood* 20(3): 297–306.

Ticktin MI (2011) *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Van Wichelen S (2015) Scales of grievability: On moving children and the geopolitics of precariousness. *Social & Cultural Geography* 16(5): 552–566.

Wernesjö U (2012) Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children: Whose perspective? *Childhood* 19(4): 495–507.

Yngvesson B (2004) National bodies and the body of the child: 'Completing' families through international adoption. In: Bowie F (ed.) *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Adoption*. London: Routledge, pp. 212–226.

Yngvesson B (2007) Refiguring kinship in the space of adoption. *Anthropological Quarterly* 80(2): 561–579.

Yngvesson B (2012) Transnational adoption and European immigration politics: Producing the national body in Sweden. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 19(1): 327–345.

Yngvesson B (2013) The child who was left behind: 'Dynamic temporality' and interpretations of history in transnational adoption. *Childhood* 20(3): 354–367.

Yngvesson B and Mahoney MA (2000) 'As one should, ought and wants to be': Belonging and authenticity in identity narratives. *Theory, Culture & Society* 17(6): 77–109.