

The Colonial Logic of Severance:

Adoption, Child Removal, and the Separation from the Past

ABSTRACT

This article introduces severance as a decolonial concept with a particular focus on adoption. Severance names and connects the manifold ways of crafting subjects and governing social relationships by cutting people off from their past and community, in particular through the targeting of children transplanting them into new relations and futures. It encompasses (1) the separation from the plural past, (2) the governance of childhood and family life, (3) the appropriation and crafting of subjects for nation-building, empire, and racial capitalism. Countering the oft-assumed exceptionality of adoption, we locate it within the colonial logic of severance and its varied historical and contemporary practices across the globe. We approach adoption as one of the sinews of the (Euro)modern systems of targeting children and family-governance based on systemic attacks on the past and “illegitimate” forms of kinship. We approach this reflection as a plurilogue, maintaining a plurality of voices in an attempt at coalition-building across fragmented identities.

KEY WORDS

BY RUBEN HORDIJK

Independent researcher

LENE MYONG

Centre for Gender Studies,
University of Stavanger

SOPHIE WITHAECKX

Maastricht University¹

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We were forced to inherit an erased memory, and we were prevented from even seeing the erasure itself.

—Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

INTRODUCTION

Adoption is often considered as an apolitical, even morally desirable practice, distinct from other (post) colonial and state-based ways of governing families and children and only concerning those directly involved (adoptees and adopting families), with little regard for first families and the broader socio-political implications. In this article, we introduce the decolonial concept of *severance* to embed modern systems of adoption within the various (Euro)modern systems of targeting children and communities, as constitutive of modern subject-formation and nation-building. Building on critical adoption studies (Hipchen, 2024; Hübinette, 2021a; Trenka et al., 2006; Wexler et al., 2023), we recalibrate adoption as a practice that is at the heart of the (Euro)modern² fabrication of individual and national subjects, entailing the destruction of shared worlds and the ripping apart of families that are not meant to exist in these configurations. Adoption as a system is therefore inherently entangled with colonialism, racial capitalism, nation-building, middle-class aspirations, disability, policing of mothers and families, and is replicated in myriad variations across geopolitical and intersectional positionalities.

The (Euro)modern systems of adoption took shape alongside the construction of the modern nuclear family. The making of the nuclear family is historically, legally and philosophically intertwined with racial and colonial logics governing kinship and therefore also with the unmaking of other kinds of kinship (Högbacka, 2016). The modern family as institution and ideology has traditionally been based on biological blood ties and the production of “legitimate” offspring for the transference of property.

Modern adoption, involving the severing of all legal ties with the first family, is a legal artifice to produce a non-related child as a “legitimate child” of the adopting family (Briggs, 2021; Terrell & Modell, 1994). Rather than challenging the modern construct of the family, adoption artificially mimics and legally re-enforces it. Adoption is distinct from the manifold ways in which non-Western communities care for children across histories and cultures. The circulation of children for purpose of care, education, or apprenticeship has been, and continues to be, common. Yet unlike (Euro)modern adoption, such practices do not normally imply the social and legal rupture with communities of origin that marks adoption (Carriere, 2007; Fonseca et al., 2015).

We introduce the concept of severance (Hordijk, 2024) to name the manifold forms of (Euro)modern violence that tear social fabrics and structures of kinship apart by targeting children, cutting them off from a plural past, and transplanting them into new relations and futures by imposing colonial, national, racial, and gendered identities. Severance is a relational concept that seeks to outline the logic undergirding a variety of practices central to the governance of childhood and family-life, manifested most clearly in colonial practices of child separation. We characterize severance through three interrelated elements: (1) the separation from the plural past, (2) the governance of childhood and family life, and (3) the appropriation and crafting of subjects for nation-building, empire, and racial capitalism. These elements will be further fleshed out below in our personal/political and inter/national genealogies of adoption.

We situate our intervention within, and seek to reconfigure the relations between, the following fields and discussions: *Decolonial theory* has had some influence on critical adoption studies, but the reverse is not necessarily true. Here, we attempt to contribute to the decolonial analytical toolbox by emphasizing the complexity and plurality of subject-positions in adoption, paying attention to the intermeshing nature of processes of gendering, classing, dis-abling,

racializing in the imperial governing of children, families, and subjects. A focus on adoption shows the need for developing a decolonial language that can complicate the central yet elusive and binary concept of “colonial difference” (Mignolo, 2000).

Feminist and queer theory has a rich tradition of deconstructing and criticizing the nuclear family (Barrett & McIntosh, 2015; Gumbs, 2016; Hill Collins, 1998). In recent years, *family abolition* has gained much traction, drawing on Marxist, Black, and Indigenous feminisms (Lewis, 2022). Adoption usually plays a marginal yet revealing role in such critiques. Often it is uncritically hailed as a positive feature able to denaturalize the family. In this rendition, it often remains disconnected from histories of racialization and empire. Critiques of adoption are usually dismissed as bio-essentialist and naive attachments to the ruse of “the natural family” (e.g. Lewis, 2019; Weeks, 2021, p. 446). We problematize such framing and aim to demonstrate the importance of embedding critiques of adoption into queer and feminist politics.

Further, we situate ourselves within *Critical Adoption Studies* and its efforts to understand adoption in the context of colonial histories and postcolonial Global South/North-relations (Cawayu, 2022; Gondouin & Thapar-Björkert, 2022; Posocco, 2022; Wexler et al., 2023). Such scholarship articulates the colonial logic that undergirds the modern systems of adoption and explores the often overlooked connections between transnational and domestic adoption, as well as the links with other technologies of child removal.

By writing together in a plurilogue, as one transnational adoptee (Lene), one domestic adoptee (Sophie), and one non-adoptee (Ruben), we created shared frames of analysis underscoring the entanglement of forces of (Euro)modernisation and colonisation in the differential production of subjects, without conflating differences or emptying out locality.

We start by discussing various colonial strategies of severance across periods, arguing for a structural undergirding colonial temporal logic. Next, we discuss

our personal stories to illustrate how severance operates differentially in differently positioned subjects. Finally, we turn to contemporary adoption debates in Scandinavia, illustrating how severance continues to condition responses to adoption controversies.

COLONIAL STRATEGIES OF SEVERANCE

The destruction of alternate forms of sociality and kinship, severing children from a sustaining and relational pastness, is strongly connected to colonial and nation-building projects and the imposition of the white nuclear family as the norm of civilized family-life. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019) argues that children serve as “political capital” for nation-building, especially for settler colonial regimes: “Childhood in settler-colonial contexts is a potent site for imperial and colonial control, colonial anxieties, and dispossession” (2019, p. 13). In Palestine, the systemic attack on children is a key feature of Israel’s settler colonial project and an attempt at containing, fragmenting, and debilitating Palestinian lives and communities, foreclosing any Indigenous Palestinian future.³ On the one hand, Indigenous children pose an obstacle to settler futurity because they are connected to ways of life that undermine settler colonialism. On the other hand, they are also “a possible ‘solution’ to settler expansion and control” (2019, p. 14). Severance from Indigenous pasts and the bio/necropolitical governance of Indigenous childhood life serves to pre-empt Indigenous temporalities and resistance and to instil a settler chronoliner civilisational temporality as the only imaginable futural horizon (Azoulay, 2019).

Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019) connects the ongoing genocidal onslaught on Palestinian children to other cases of settler colonialism. The Stolen Generations in Australia, or the boarding school systems on Turtle Island with their stated aim to “Kill the Indian, save the Man”, are notorious examples of negating Indigenous pasts and identity, preparing a menial labour-class serving white supremacist settler nations, whilst facilitating massive systemic abuse

and neglect within a genocidal project. Similarly, the colonisation of Sami communities happened in part through subjection to various family-laws and through the boarding schools (Knoblock, 2022). The deliberate cutting off the intergenerational transmission leads to fragmentation (Dankertsen, 2016), to forced disavowal of one's past, and orients toward a white supremacist national ideal of subjecthood that will forever remain unattainable through an essentialised difference. Fragmentation through the severance from the communal past has as its ultimate aim to pre-empt any Indigenous claim to futurity, to erase Indigenous identity, forcefully relegating it to a closed off past that has no bearing on the present or future (Azoulay, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Severance is a general feature of extractivist colonial strategies. In non-settler colonies, the governance of "mixed" (*métis*) children, especially their classification as "orphans" and subsequent relocation to religious orphanages and colonial schools, was central to the maintenance of racial boundaries and hierarchies (Blouin, 2025; Mak et al., 2000). Practices of separating children continued in the aftermath of decolonisation. For example, after independence, in the former Belgian colonies Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo, *métis* children were systematically separated from their African families and many of them were shipped to Belgium to be raised in foster or adoptive families (Heynssens, 2017).

Scandinavian forms of severance are connected to an imperial humanitarianism that has been central to the Scandinavian self-image. For the Danish missionaries in India, the "saving" of the heathens from their "bad parents" or heathen and "uncivilised" families was considered as crucial to ideas of civilization, family, race, and religion (Vallgård, 2015). In recent years, survivors, activists, and scholars in Kalaallit Nunaat and Denmark have examined the Danish state's operationalization of severance. This involves practices such as the removal of Kalaallit children from Kalaallit Nunaat, including the 22 "experiment children" appropriated in 1951 to form an assimilated elite (Jensen et al., 2020; Thiesen, 2023), and the

private, unregulated abductions/adoptions of Kalaallit children into white Danish families from the early 1950s until the late 1970s (Trøndheim, 2010). There are clear continuities with the ongoing forced adoptions and removals of Kalaallit children in Denmark (Adler Reimer as cited in Sørensen, 2023; Bryant, 2025). These different practices of severance which are simultaneously tearing apart relationality and policing Kalaallit communities, have often relied on narratives of modernization and progress. Moreover, they have unfolded vis-à-vis the Danish state's far-reaching family planning regimes in Kalaallit Nunaat, such as the intrauterine device (IUD) program from 1967, which resulted not only in "the loss of an extensive generation of Kalaallit children but also of the future they would have mobilized" (Dyrendom Graugaard et al., 2025, p. 10).

STORIES OF SEVERANCE

In this section we situate our own stories in relation to severance. Through our differently situated knowledges and inter/national political contexts, we explore the emergence of adoption systems in their (post)colonial, racial, classed, and gendered dimensions. Whilst emphasizing the irreducible differences in subject-positions and experience, we reiterate the argument for the need of shared frameworks and relational concepts.

Sophie: Refusing fragmentation – reclaiming shared worlds

The notion of severance provides an opportunity to reconnect what is too often separated, even in some decolonial analyses of adoption: the interlocking nature of processes of gendering, classing, dis-abling, and racializing, marking the (un)making of families across the globe as expressions of an overarching colonial logic. Recognizing such interconnections enables us to better understand the linkages between domestic and transnational adoption, but also between adoption and contemporary family-making through assisted reproductive technologies (ART). Thinking from my own personal story, I reflect on

how the impression of being alone and exceptional is itself an effect of severance as it works to individualize, fragment, and depoliticize adoptee experiences.

Separated from my white Catholic Belgian mother soon after my birth in 1979, I was handed over to social services and placed in a foster family that eventually adopted me. As the story went, my mother, who was suffering from mental disabilities, was unable to care for me and my African father was unknown and apparently not interested. For years, I was invested in this compassionate story, contrasting the unwillingness of my first parents with the generosity of those who re-homed me into a stable, more capable, more suitable family. It took me years to re-imagine and reconstruct this story, as one in which a mentally disabled woman was stripped off the opportunity to bond with her newborn child; in which laws governing marriage and divorce mandated that my father's name could not be inscribed on my birth certificate, as she was married to another man at the time; in which social workers refrained from informing my father about his parental rights; in which my father's Senegalese family was not informed about where I had been transferred to and had been wondering for years where I had been. It took me years to re-understand my story as one in which one type of family—marked by a multiplicity of racial and religious backgrounds, “illegitimate” relationships and disability—became disqualified and replaced by a “proper,” legally recognised, Catholic, nuclear family environment.

The story seems atypical and singular. Only after years of engaging with both domestic and transnational adoptees did I come to realise that my experience was not exceptional at all. I now easily recognize myself in the experiences of loss, disconnection, and fragmentation marking the stories of transnational adoptees who yearn the erasure of their cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds and struggle to meaningfully connect with retrieved family members (Withaekx et al., 2023). I see the experience of my first mother reflected in the decades of systematic forced adoptions organised by Catholic and Prot-

estant authorities in Belgium and the Netherlands, affecting thousands of women deemed unfit to raise their own children (Smits van Waesberghe, 2021). I can relate the refusal to enable my atypical first family from existing to the colonial Belgian state's investment in removing *métis* children from their African families and re-homing them in Catholic orphanages and Belgian white families (Candaele, 2020).

I see our inabilities to connect such apparently very different experiences as an intrinsic part of severance. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) describes how colonialism involves the “systematic fragmentation” of colonized communities, disconnecting them from “their histories, their landscapes, their languages, their social relations, and their own ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting with the world” (2012, p. 28). Splitting, carving up, and disconnecting are also features of adoption. Adoption individualizes and depoliticizes the adoptee experience by erasing the collective character of the adoptee experience (Trenka et al., 2006). Adoption does not only separate children from parents; it also separates siblings and even twins from each other, placing them in separate families and locations, and actively preventing them from knowing about each other's existence. Adoptees mostly grow up isolated from other adoptees, an experience which is exacerbated for those growing up in rural areas. Coping strategies like acquiescing and expressing gratefulness rather than anger or sadness further compound isolation and prevent the development of a collective consciousness that can form the basis for political action (McKee, 2019).

Fragmentation and depoliticization further occur through the common treatment of domestic and transnational adoption as deriving from unrelated histories rather than as deeply entangled, and mutually informed practices. For example, some European countries have recently publicly admitted the harms of past practices of domestic adoption within their boundaries. Yet, contemporary transnational adoptions are driven by exactly the same dynamics informing these now condemned domestic adoptions in Europe: poverty, stigmatization of unwed mother-

hood, discrimination (Bos, 2008; Högbäck, 2016). Nevertheless, these same governments are reluctant to put an end to transnational adoptions.⁴

Adoption is also inseparable from the expansion of family-making through Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART): the increased demand for these technologies (notably surrogacy) and the desire for genetically related children have been identified as linked to the shrinking demand for adoption (Scherman et al., 2016). At the same time, ART now replicates much of the geopolitical, gendered, and racialized inequalities, and exploitation that mark adoption practices.

Re-politicizing adoptee experiences requires us to recognize the shared pasts that mark the (un)making of families across the globe. This includes the building of solidarities between domestic and transnational adoptees, but also between adoptees and donor- and surrogacy conceived people: all of them result from globalised, racialised, and gendered reproductive inequalities, privileging the constitution of some kinds of families to the detriment and destruction of others. By reclaiming the shared worlds that shape our experiences, we can refuse fragmentation and position ourselves as emanating from entangled histories that cannot, and should not, be separated.

Lene: Relating to a plural past

I am interested in the concept of severance because it invites us to reflect upon the multiple dimensions of separation and appropriation. In the case of adoption: from the bureaucratic logics and the biopolitical technologies that enforce separation to how adoptees challenge these structures by politicizing how the erasure of our pasts conscripts us into futures defined by coloniality. At the same time, severance may be used to think more carefully about how we understand and re-relate to a plural past.

I live and work in Denmark and Norway where different modes of adoption are central to the biopolitical fabric of the welfare state. I was born in South Korea in 1972, presumably in November, and adopted

to Denmark in April 1973. I have little information about my pre-adoption life and the specific circumstances and processes that enabled a Korean social worker to assign me the status of adoptable child.

In her examination of the emergence of South Korea's transnational adoption system, Koo (2024, p. 2) describes how Japanese colonial rule (1910-45) implemented the family registry (*hojök*) which assigned legal status per family unit. As a patrilinear order everyone in each household was registered under the name of the male head of the family. The patrilinear *hojök* system continued until 2008 when it was replaced by the Family Relations Register, which registers every family member individually. I have no knowledge of whether I exist on a *hojök*, but as many Korean adoptees I have an "orphan registry" (*koa hojök*) which has been crucial in facilitating adoptions from South Korea. As Koo explains, on the *koa hojök* the child is entered "as the head of a single-person household, leaving blank all familial information such as details about the parents" (2024, p. 2). Thus, it simultaneously constructs "orphanhood" and ascribes legal status to the child based on this status.

As a document that makes the child adoptable, the *koa hojök* is ambiguous. It erases and forecloses information about the child's relations to kin and family, but it also prescribes a new origin. The *koa hojök* resembles the conventional *hojök* in that it stipulates the geographical origin (*pon'gwan*) of a family name (2024, p. 20). The combination of *pon'gwan* and family name is important: it places those with the same family name (e.g. Kim or Park) into different kinship groups based on the clan's geographical origin (2024, p. 20). As adoptees we have been assigned names and *pon'gwans* on our *koa hojöks*, however, in 1976 the South Korean government decided that adoption agencies should use "Hanyang" (Seoul) as geographical origin on all *koa hojöks*, because no family names were thought to originate from there (2024, p. 20). This implied that agencies could avoid inscribing adoptees into already existing kinship groups. According to Koo, establishing Hanyang as an origin placed children in a "symbolic terra nullius with no

ties to any Korean lineage groups” (2024, p. 20). Hanyang was thus invented as “an imaginary origin that was created only to erase both itself and the adopted children from the Korean nation” (2024, p. 20)

My *koa hojök* follows this template. As an infant assigned the name Cho Shinhee, I am listed as the head of my household with no other family members. Hanyang is entered as the origin of Cho, my family name. Thus, my *koa hojök* from 1973 anticipates the 1976 directive instructing all adoption agencies to use Hanyang. As a fictional adoptee origin, Hanyang operates simultaneously to erase our ties to family and nation, *and* as “a symbol of the impossibility of fully severing transnational adoptees from South Korea” (2024, p. 22). As Koo points out, it is ironic that the Korean authorities would later find out that there is, in fact, one name that originates from Hanyang—that is the name of Cho.

As an able-bodied infant, cut off from kin, and head of my own household, I was considered a perfect child for a white, adoptive family. I have searched for my Korean family, but I belong to the large group of adoptees who exist without (physical) reunion and with no or little information about family. The meaning of search and reunion processes has changed significantly during my adult life. Over the past 30 years, adoptees have turned search and reunion into a normalised desire and experience, not something to be automatically shunned (for the complexities of reunion see e.g. Docan-Morgan, 2024; Kim, 2010). These processes have generated crucial knowledge about the violences of the adoption system, the experiences of our first families as well as the irreversible consequences of family separation, and the potentials for mediating parts of its harmful impact. In this sense, search and reunion have not only been significant and life-changing for individual adoptees and first families, but also pivotal for critical adoptee thinking and the politicization of adoption critical movements.

Notably, these developments have occurred alongside a shift in pro-adoption discourse and policy that in-

creasingly places more emphasis on the preservation of adoptees’ “roots,” right to access information about the “past,” and/or to seek reunion (De Graeve, 2010). At stake in this discursive annexation is the production of a new set of adoption morals that renews credibility in the adoption system, and the creation of new domains of adoption governance attuned to control and mediate how adoptees should relate to the past (Stuvøy & Myong, 2023). “Knowledge” about our pasts has thus been turned into a convenient and depoliticized solution to adoption trauma.

In the context of these political struggles, I wonder what it means to exist without reunion *and* in opposition to a system geared to erase our pasts and murder what could have been? In what ways does existence without reunion allows for alternative modes of relating and reconnecting to a plural past and for building abolitionist futures that are not contingent upon family reunion? If we wish to engage with these questions, decolonial critiques of adoption must build upon a plurality of adoptee standpoints, including knowledges generated from experiences that exist without the possibility of, or desire for, family reunion. This is not the same as reproducing the colonial logics that make the relations between us and our first families disposable or to minimize the harmful consequences of family separation. It is an attempt to expand the horizon of adoptee resistance, solidarity, and liberation.

Ruben: *Dutch Family-Politics, Adoption and Nation-Building*

Adoption is not in my family history (or at least not that I am aware of). But what the ongoing conversations with my co-authors on severance and adoption have made clear is that my position is not so much one of an *outsider* to adoption, but of *implication* within the imperial formations of family-politics from *inside* the nuclear family. Adoption is inseparable from the violent construction of the nuclear family, as the civilisational bourgeois ideal in whose name kinship-systems and social communities continue to be broken down and policed. By considering myself

as an *outsider* to adoption, I would repeat the isolating of adoption from systems of family-governance within nation-building and racial capitalism, foregoing a shared frame to understand the entanglement of these systems of power.

My family history (to which I do have access) inevitably denaturalises the alleged ideal of the nuclear family that has played its ideological part in sustaining modern systems of adoption. I find a non-exceptional story of my grandparents' generation aspiring to move from working class to middle class and to partake in normative postwar Dutch nation-building. My grandfather, a mineworker, chose not to pass on his first language (a local Dutch dialect), so as to instruct the children in "civilised" Dutch (*algemeen beschaafd Nederlands*), to unburden them by marks of regionality-*qua*-inferiority. His first wife, from a Polish migrant family, also did not pass on her first language (Polish). Although she was happy to drop her Polish name to avoid daily discrimination and to ascend to an unquestioned Dutch white identity, the more important reason for her not to speak Polish was patriarchal anxiety of my grandfather. Not tolerating a language spoken in the house he did not understand, he claimed patriarchal authority to control her actions, movement, and speech (as isolated housewife and mother, disconnected from the past and giving up on future-dreams outside the role of housewife). By choosing not to pass on their first languages, the plural cross-border working class migrant histories disappear so that the Dutch middle-class family could emerge. The severance from languages, cultures, the plural past, and the forms of violence inside and outside the family that cause, inflict, and repeat these cuts, continue to be transmitted in silences that run through the ideal(ised) form of family that served 20th-century nation-building and capital-accumulation. Growing up, I never questioned my Dutch identity, but by piecing together and retelling a multigenerational story I have come to see the violent histories that made this unquestioned "natural" identification possible and enabled all the privileges of a white Dutch (cis)male citizen from a middle-class family. Through silences around these

histories, the nuclear family appears as natural and the white normative citizen/subject appears as a natural being, undone of its relation to a past of plural languages and cultures.

The local and national family-politics from which a middle-class Dutch subject could emerge, shed of the traces of a plural past, occurred in the post-war years based on rebuilding the nation through conservative family-politics. Its slogan: "family-restoration restores the nation" (*gezinsherstel brengt volksherstel*; Houwink ten Cate, 2024, p. 27). In 1956, the first Dutch adoption law was introduced, primarily aimed at domestic adoption. For decades to come, young unwed mothers were forced to give up their children for adoption. Norms around gender, race, and religion were decisive in the fate of thousands of children and mothers. It was considered to be the mother's moral duty, as atonement for her "sin," and to be in the best interest of the child, by offering them a future in a "proper" Christian household (Smits van Waesberghe, 2021).

SCANDINAVIAN ATTACHMENTS TO SEVERANCE AND ADOPTION

In this last section, we return to the case of Denmark to illustrate how severance continues to condition responses to recent criticisms on adoption. The Scandinavian⁵ countries have long cherished a self-image as civilisationally progressive and gender-equal societies: a self-representation that sustains various colonial forms of severance, ranging from transnational adoption to (other) eugenicist approaches to race and family. Therefore, the potential dismantling of one adoption system will not necessarily destabilise other practices of severance, rather it might reinforce them. At stake here is not only that desires and demands for children create new markets for adoptable children but also that deep-seated (Euro)modern attachments to severance are nurtured and reconfigured through shifting adoption practices and political attempts to reform the systems.

Historically, Danish governments have sought to mitigate abuses in transnational adoption by imposing reforms of the adoption system (Stuvøy & Myong, 2023). In recent years, adoptee activists have focused on exposing and problematising legal transgressions, human trafficking, and human rights violations while at the same time emphasising the importance of family reunification. Critical adoptees and groups such as Danish Korean Rights Group (DKRG) have called for investigations that first and foremost seek accountability through legal frameworks. The Danish government has repeatedly rejected such demands, and in the beginning of June 2025 secured a parliamentary majority for an agreement allocating 22,8 mill. DKK to a so-called impartial investigation, covering the years 1964-2016 and spanning 70 sending countries (Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing, 2025). The agreement also allocates 2 mill DKK for an analysis with the aim of “developing one or more models for a future adoption system” (2025, p.1). It is significant that this analysis must consider *both* transnational and domestic adoption.

The Danish case illustrates how political moves to investigate adoption practices are deeply entangled with intentions to continue and rebuild adoption systems. The promise of reform—rather than abolition or legal accountability as proposed by some adoptees—reveals the ongoing attachment to severance. The technologies of child removals change and shift in the context of these struggles (Lindgren, 2021). While transnational adoptions are (temporarily) suspended in Denmark awaiting the review and the scaffolding of a future adoption system, a majority in Danish parliament has concurrently worked to strengthen the provisions for forced adoptions (Sehested Rom, 2024) and/or adoptions from the foster care system. Danish political support for forced adoption arrangements has increased over the past 15 years. Similar tendencies can be seen in Norway, Finland, and Sweden (Järvinen, 2024; Lind et al, 2024). These measures target groups who are already marginalised due to austerity, disability, Indigeneity, and/or migrant or refugee status.

These briefly sketched trajectories indicate a turn in which the biopolitical calibration of contemporary adoption is increasingly mobilised through rationales of “child protection” and carceral and punitive logics (Mulinari, 2024) that overlap and coexist with humanitarian imperialism (Withaeckx, 2024), Nordic racial exceptionalism (Hübinette, 2021b; Loftsdottir & Jensen, 2012), and colonial care (Prattes & Myong, 2025). Moreover, what emerges from this is how white reckonings with abuses in adoption are mobilized to create new grounds of legitimacy for adoption. What continues to connect these different modalities of child removal and appropriation—across transnational adoption, domestic (forced) adoption, and foster care—is the severing of the plural past and the inherently violent premises of what constitutes a desirable subject and a “proper” family within the borders of the Scandinavian welfare state.

CONCLUSION

What (dis)connects the genealogical threads of adoption and family separations across Scandinavia, Belgium, the Netherlands, South Korea, Senegal, Congo, Palestine, Kalaallit Nunaat, and Sápmi, is the colonial logic of severance: the separation from the plural past for the sake of imperial identity-formation and nation-building through the governance of childhood and family. Adoption is one of the sinews of the (Euro)modern strategies of targeting children and governing families based on systemic attacks on the past and “illegitimate” forms of kinship.

In this contribution, thinking through our personal experiences with disconnection, displacement, and family-formation, we attempted to create shared frames of analysis to understand the connections between practices of child separation and family formation across a variety of sociopolitical contexts. We allowed ourselves an associative and relational way of writing and thinking, highlighting the entanglements based on the multiple directions of our conversations. We followed the threads of the various fragmented identities that are (differentially) imposed on us in

an attempt at unlearning and coalition-building. This way, we aim to counter the divisive fragmented identities that separate adoptees as an isolated group and special case.

Our exchanges have brought out varied, but interconnected ways in which families, national identities, and subjects become constituted through the erasure, transformation, and re-arrangement of communal kinship-ties. Such practices affect both the adopted and non-adopted and play out in different ways across the colonial difference, in varied ranges of intensity and violence. The notion of severance enabled us to draw connections among practices often separated in academia and the political imaginary, which helps to challenge the assumed exceptionality of adoption. In its unrelenting logic of erasing and eradicating genealogies, practices, and family types that do not conform to the aims of (Euro)modern, nationalist ideals of identity and family, all of us are in some way or another affected by severance. At the same time, we have also examined how adoption continues to operate as an efficient tool informing humanitarian imaginaries of the nation and of “proper” parenting, as is especially outspoken in the context of Scandina-

via. This serves both as an intervention in and bridge to various queer and feminist critiques of the family, which too often have dismissed critiques of adoption as a bio-essentialist attachment to an alleged “natural family.” While adoption has become the object of incisive criticisms and its systematic abuses can no longer be ignored, current political attempts at redeeming and revising adoption continue to ignore the violent histories of colonialism and nation-building and reproduce investments in (Euro)modern systems of severance. Rejections of calls for suspending and abolishing adoption express a deep-seated attachment to the underlying humanitarian welfare state narratives that constitute adoptive families and receiving nations as benevolent actors working for “the good” of child and nation. The logic of severance continues to operate then through a variety of practices—from shifting technologies of adoptions, the forced removal of children, to the genocidal politics of the settler colonial state. Disrupting severance will require a more radical engagement with the underlying logic constituting the system of coloniality, as it continues to operate across the globe in variegated, yet intimately entangled, modalities.

NOTES

[1] Author names are listed alphabetically, reflecting no hierarchy of contribution.

[2] (Euro)modernity is a critical renaming of the West, indicating the hegemonic imperial project based on Euro-American colonization of the past 500 years, without pinpointing it to a geographical space (Hordijk, 2024). (Euro)modernity is, to differing degrees and in different ways, at work at every locality. Simultaneously, each locale contains plural histories and other resources that are creolized and/or antagonistic to it. (Euro)modernity thus allows for clarity on the hegemonic imperial Western formations across the globe, without demarcations of “the West vs. the Rest,” which would separate subjects into those who reside “inside” or “outside” of modernity. Nor does it imply that only Euro-American actors have agency in the construction of Euromodernity. Instead, it serves to highlight interconnections and complexity of plural positions, always implicated in and constituted by (Euro)modernity, but also in relation to a plural past. The movement of (Euro)modernity is precisely the varied forms of severance from, and absorption of, this plurality.

[3] Israeli nation-building also employs its severance from the plurality of Jewish pasts through Ashkenazi-models of national identity. Mizrahi Jews were forced to be separated from their pasts (portrayed as barbaric) in myriad ways, for example through the illegal adoption of children of Yemenite Jews. Between 1949 and 1950, an unknown number of Yemenite children were declared dead and put up for adoption for Ashkenazi families as to de-Arabise the Jewish population of Israel (Liebel, 2024).

[4] In Belgium, the Flemish government and bishops formally apologized in 2015 for the forced adoptions between 1950-1980 and denounced the harmful separations of mothers and children. Despite reports revealing the systematic illicit practices in transnational adoptions, the Flemish government declared in 2021 that there is “a future for intercountry adoption” in Flanders and refrained from an adoption stop (VRT, 2015).

[5] We use Scandinavian, rather than Nordic, to emphasize the leading role of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark in transnational adoption. The three countries have the highest number of transnational adoptees per capita.

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