



Raised by White People. Conceptualisations of ‘Culture’ in the Foster Placement of African Minority Youth in Norway

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Abstract

This paper examines the intricate dynamics of transethnic foster placement in Norway, focusing on African minority youth and how ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ is conceptualised within this context. Through semi-structured interviews, the study builds on the lived experiences of a set of 15 families (including 60 children), alongside insights from fostered individuals, foster parents, and a placement official. The discussion delves into the profound effects of cultural dislocation and identity crisis experienced by minority youth, problematising how foster placement often leads to adverse life trajectories, including issues with uprootedness, substance abuse, psychiatric illness, and loss of ethnic identity. At the core of the discussion is the contention that while the child protection system in Norway is mandated to safeguard children, it inadvertently neglects the cultural rights and identity development of African minority youth. Employing insight from Franz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre to articulate the psychological impact and moral implications of such transethnic placements, the paper argues for re-evaluating assimilation practices and cultural rights within the child protection framework, highlighting the need for a culturally sensitive and rights-based approach to foster care. This research contributes to the broader discourse on human rights and social work, emphasising the ethical and legal dimensions of fostering minority children.

Keywords Foster placement · Identity development · Culture · Minority · Human Rights

Introduction: Transethnic Foster Placement and Right to ‘a Culture’

Children’s right to protection is paramount in the Norwegian child protection services’ mandate. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNHR, 1989) has been ratified into Norwegian law, and Article 30 guarantees that members of minority cultures shall not be denied the right ‘to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, and to use his or her own language’. Previous research has pointed out that African minority parents in Norway live with a dread of losing their children to foster care, and this fear is often based on circulating rumours as to the child protection services (CPS) mandate (Handulle & Vassenden, 2023; Terrefe, 2023). The fear and distrust of CPS pertain to the misconception that African and other minority children are ‘forcefully assimilated’ into

Norwegian society through placement in Norwegian homes (Wathne & Kisuule, 2023). However, arguably, in practice, the cultural rights of minorities have never really been tested and in child protection, ‘culture’ carries somewhat ephemeral connotations.

Through a long-term qualitative methodological approach, we have investigated African minority families’ experiences with the child protection system and foster placement in Norway. We sought to understand how ‘culture’ is conceptualised by the various actors involved in the care order placement of African youth through the Norwegian child protection system and the effects of living in majority homes on the identity development of these youth. While the resultant multifaceted data may not be statistically significant, and the experiences we describe cannot be generalised, our approach enlightens various perspectives concerning these placement processes, placing us in a position to elaborate on how ‘identity development’ is considered. The parents and placement alumni in our material explicate the tragic outcomes and life trajectories they feel ensue in response to CPS care orders; they believe Black foster alumni often suffer adverse life trajectories and face

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issues with uprootedness, substance abuse, psychiatric illness, removal to Africa, violence, and suicide. Central narrative themes include loss of religion, language, and ethnic identity among children in private home care, seen to accrue on top of other psychosocially adverse effects like poor everyday functioning, depressed levels of educational completion, lack of attachment, depressed trust in Norwegian institutions, and the effects this has on civic citizenship. We elaborate on these themes elsewhere. Parents are concerned that their children should lose touch with their ethnic identities and communities and feel the ‘enforced assimilation’ of minority children, in many cases, is worse than the conditions CPS investigated in the first place. Parents and alumni portray life as more adverse following interventions, a cause of great consternation and bitterness, and recurrent analytical themes in our data.

The lived experience of transethnic foster care has not received sufficient empirical focus — a point we discuss below (‘Background: Life Trajectories among Placement Alumni’). We problematise that care orders often lead to detrimental life outcomes for placement alumni. Though dissent to this view has been widespread, the point is often made that separating a child from her parent(s) can have negative, long-term emotional and psychological consequences, in a phrase many of our participants would concur, ‘that may be worse than leaving the child at home’ (Trivedi, 2019). Acknowledging the lack of consensus on the effect of ethnicity in transethnic placement on outcomes on the life trajectories of alumni, the background discussion is meant to support a hypothesis that depending on the child’s age at placement and other factors, the potential severance of linguistic, religious, cultural, and ethnic community ties, on top of the loss or pause of familial relations, may cause ‘more urgent’ concerns (Edwards et al., 2021) in the lives of ethnic minority alumni. The following empirical exposition explores how transethnic placement may entail an additional layer of complication and a fractured sense of self among Black alumni. The stories in our data of split families, uprootedness, loss of language, culture, religion and ethnic identity, and futures put on hold give rise to the following moral question: *Is it ‘worse’ for an African child to end up in a Norwegian home than in the home of an ‘ethnically matched’ family?* In addressing this moral issue, we borrow from the intellectual tradition *Négritude* (see Analytical Framework), recognising the psychological need of minority citizens to articulate social identities in opposition to the assimilationist expectations of society. We then draw empirically on the narratives of a father whose children have been ‘assimilated’, who stands for the parental perspective in our material; three foster alumni, who elaborate on minority identity; a foster placement administrator, who speaks to the CPS structure and how ‘culture’ is prioritised vis-a-vis ‘protection’; and two foster fathers, who address the lack of

support from the child protection system around the issue of identity development. Together this intimates how ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ is handled in the Norwegian foster placement system and sets the premises for a discussion on how alumni are made to live with a fractured sense of personhood.

The paper argues that the transethnic foster placement of minority youth in Norway, while aimed at providing safety and care, often leads to complex challenges in identity development and cultural dislocation for youth. It bears underlining that the term ‘culture’ is not clearly defined or demarcated either by the authorities on children’s right to ‘a culture’ or in the parents’ perception of that right. For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to note that the amorphous and nebulous conceptualisation of the term goes to the core of the issue when operationalised in practice, and it is the ontological lacuna generated by this vagueness that is at the heart of the present argument. This necessitates a deeper understanding and re-evaluation of cultural rights and assimilationist practices within the child protection system. Our presentation of findings around identity development in Black youth fostered by White families reflects in four research questions. Based on our data, we ask the following: (1) What structures are in place in the Norwegian foster care system to accommodate the identity development of minority youth in foster care? (2) What outcomes ensue when Black children are placed in White foster homes in Norway? (3) How do identity issues play out in the lives of alumni and their families? (4) How can these issues be accommodated in practice?

Background: Life Trajectories Among Placement Alumni

Following increased national and international focus on the negative impact of such interventions and the ‘biological principle’, which holds that children are best brought up within their biological family, the rate of care orders has fallen dramatically in Norway across all categories over the last few years (Falch-Eriksen & Skivenes, 2023). Even so, relations between CPS and minorities continue to impact minority citizens’ sense of social citizenship, ability to participate and trust in institutions (Wathne & Kisuule, 2023). In Norway, transethnic foster placement is largely unidirectional in as much as CPS reports persisting difficulties in recruiting African minority families with an interest in foster work.

Foster placement away from biological family carries relative risk compared to children being cared for at home and in institutions in terms of adverse effects on the life trajectories of alumni (Conn et al., 2015; Gypen et al., 2017; Horwitz et al., 2001; Maclean et al., 2016; Smith, 2009; Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011; Washington, 2021). Individuals

with a foster placement history have been found to suffer an increased incidence of mental health (Lou et al., 2018; Engler et al., 2020; Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2023; Green, 2022; Tan et al., 2023) and somatic health issues (Kools et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2023; Smales et al., 2020). Foster placement alumni face an increased risk of substance abuse (Beal et al., 2023), financial, educational (Johnson, 2021; Luke & O'Higgins, 2018; Welbourne & Leeson, 2012), identity development, and attachment issues (Garcia Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2016; Kerr & Cossar, 2014). These issues pertain to developments before and during placement. Recent findings from Norway show that foster-placed children have a heightened risk of receiving somatic and psychiatric treatment following the onset of placement (Drange, 2022). Children in foster care are among the most vulnerable groups in Norwegian society (Ames et al., 2021).

Historically, the impact of ethnicity on foster placement outcomes has been hotly contested (Feigelman & Silverman, 1984; Horwitz et al., 2001; Moffatt & Thoburn, 2001). Questions have been raised regarding the extent to which a minority child is better served waiting for an ethnic match in placement (Forde-Mazrui, 1994). Much of the interethnic foster placement research has been carried out in US contexts (McRoy & Griffin, 2012), where the debate has deep historical roots and has taken on politicised overtones. For instance, the Disproportionality Movement (Bartholet, 2009; Knott & Giwa, 2012) argued that Black children are disproportionately represented in foster placement statistics due to inherent racism in the child protection system and advocated ethnic matching of Black children with Black foster families to ensure cultural continuity and the cultural rights of the child. On the other hand, through the Multi Ethnic Placement Act, political attempts were made in the US to ensure that Black children do not have to wait for same-ethnic foster homes (McRoy et al., 2007). This debate would seem to raise the issue of the place of identity development in considering the child's best interest (Pinderhughes et al., 2019) — and that has currency in the present context.

When discussing conditions for developing and living out any form of ethnic identity in interethnic foster placement, context is exceedingly important. Majority/minority relations play out differently in, say, the US, France, the UK, and Norway. Even so, there is something to be learned from other historical contexts where broader relations between White and Black (or other ethnic minority) citizens reflect in local child protection and foster placement practices. Part of the debate is the perspective that highlights that transethnic placements often lead to *successful* outcomes, including psychosocial factors, unplanned terminations, and coping (Thoburn et al., 2000). A body of research has argued that transethnic adoptees do not suffer worse identity development or other outcomes than ethnic majority foster-placed

youth (Simon & Altstein, 1996; Thoburn et al., 2005). In a paper dated more than two decades back, Park and Evans argued that 'a growing body of empirical research has purported to demonstrate that transracial adoption does not negatively impact, and may positively benefit, children of colour, particularly Black children'. Against that backdrop, Park and Evans stressed the need for research that takes an Africentric approach to addressing claims that placement in majority homes 'serves the best interests of Black and other minority children' (Park & Green, 2000). Much of the literature on interethnic placement contexts reports adverse effects that seem to accumulate (McRoy et al., 2007). In the US, for instance, where Black males are 2.5 times more likely to be foster-placed than their White peers (Johnson, 2021), Black foster youth have been found to face significant educational disparities in comparison to their foster-placed peers of other groups (Whitman, 2021).

Whatever the effects on life trajectories, transethnic placement involves the ethical and legal issues related to minority children's cultural rights. Ethnic minority youth who live through foster placement in majority homes have, in many historical and geographical locations, faced issues of ethnic identity disruptions while in care (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2021; Degener et al., 2020, 2022, 2023; Samuels, 2009). Previous research has addressed the best ways to accommodate minority ethnic children's needs around identity development in foster care, and ethnic identity is arguably an important developmental process for ethnic minority youth (Ludeke, 2023; Padilla et al., 2010; Pinderhughes et al., 2019; Shang et al., 2022; Tyrell et al., 2019; White et al., 2008; Williams, 2010). In the UK, transethnic placements have seen their share of controversy (Barn & Kirton, 2012). Empirical studies on the lived experience and effects of foster placement of minority youth in majority homes are needed in European settings.

In Norway, the interethnic placement of minority children has a long and painful history, explicitly tied to the Samí national minority in earlier years and, later, to children of first- and second-generation immigrants to the country. Few qualitative studies have explored the Norwegian foster placement experiences of minority families and the life that follows (Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Handulle & Vassenden, 2023; Mabile et al., 2022). Little is known about the (ethnic) identity development of minority youth with foster care experience in Norway, hence the present focus of this paper. To summarise, even as ethnic matching in foster placement has been called an effective way to provide ethnic minority children with stable social environments (LaBrenz et al., 2022; Haysom et al., 2020; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012), the following conclusion has also been reached: 'The key weakness of foster care is not so much what happens in foster care but what happens after it' (Sinclair et al., 2005, p. 122). This points to the importance of a phenomenological approach

(Fanon, 2008, p. 130) to how ethnic minority citizens experience their own and family members' placement in majority settings exposing them to processes in which ethnic identity development, cultural rights, and sense of belonging may be jeopardised. Tracing the effects of the foster placement system's ability to handle this issue in the lives of foster-placed youth benefits from a multifaceted approach.

Research Methods and Data: Narratives and Destinies

This paper leans on data collected and analysed as part of a qualitative research project into African minorities' relationship with CPS, incorporating various perspectives and comprising more than 160 h of semi-structured interviews. Seeking to understand the lived experience of minority placements and maintain experience-near perspectives, foci that lend themselves to qualitative methodological investigation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) — our recruitment criteria included care order history and ethnic background in sub-Saharan Africa. Participants were recruited through professional networks and snowballing. Represented in this paper by 'Shamus' — 15 parents¹ accounted for the destinies of more than 60 children, removed primarily to Norwegian homes, nationwide, from which some returned to parental care before reaching the age of maturity, and others only after turning 18. In addition, we interviewed six Black placement alumni, three of whom have given voice in this paper; a set of foster parents comprising two male foster parents with minority African identity and a female foster parent with a majority ethnic background; and a placement official.² Identity development is a central narrative theme unfolding through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

Ethical concerns include anonymisation and the preservation of families' dignity. Emphasising an informative debate without adding to stigma, the empirical input has been presented in ways that ensure and prioritise anonymity. Wathne and Kisuule (2023) can be consulted for a fuller description of methodology, analytical approach, and ethical concerns. The research project was approved by SIKT

Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (project number, 270863).

Analytical Framework: Assimilationism and Fractured Identities

As intimated, transethnic placement has not been thoroughly empirically explored in national and international contexts. How to make sense of the lived experiences of Black children raised in White homes, often resulting in disturbances to identity development and uprootedness? A framework to understand the psychological impact of alienation that has left indelible marks on the individuals and families portrayed is needed. As indicated, previous research in various international settings is not of one mind as to the extent to which transethnic foster placement is an independent risk factor for Black children. However, running through our data is the conceptualisation that neglect of the children's *blackness* (or 'culture', 'ethnicity', 'race') has led to the abysmal outcomes in life trajectories — prior biographies notwithstanding. Similar to previous studies on transethnic placements, many of the youth referred to in our study speak of being unable to find a steady footing in a 'White world' (Ansbro et al., 2023). Aware of minorities' right to 'a culture', parents see 'enforced assimilation' as the consequence of interethnic placements and formulate this as a human rights issue. To understand the socio-psychological impact of these placements, we draw on an affinity between the 'experience of moral injury' (Haight, Cho, Soffer-Elnekave, Nashbandi, & Suleiman, 2023) felt by parents and alumni and the attempt made by thinkers of *Négritude* to rectify the stride of Black people under circumstances where some of the essence of Black identity was glossed over and negated.

Négritude represents an intercontinental, francophone, poetic, philosophical, and political movement — albeit controversial, short-lived, and absorbed by the *antinégritude* movement — which was informed by the psychological need to countermand the cultural force of assimilation in French post-war society (Hiddleston, 2010; Irele, 1965). Some of the intellectual debate on this movement is slightly dated, though referenced here primarily to contextualise the philosophical background of the movement. It may be contended that interethnic foster placement in Norway is a somewhat far cry from French colonialism (House, 2005). However, the French ideal of republicanism, in which all sources of ethnic and cultural differences are denied under the 'cloak of citizenship' (Kristeva, 1993, pp. 58–64), has bearing on how specific needs of minority children have not been systematically factored in. In particular, the debate between Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) and Jean-Paul Sartre in *Black Orpheus* (1964) brings phenomenological and ontological light to an analysis of how the 'politics of White

¹ Including 14 women, primarily single mothers — Christians and Muslims — with various lengths of residency in Norway and various case histories with CPS. Previous papers draw on the narratives and experiences of participants beyond Shamus. Personal information is given utmost sparingly and all names are fictional.

² In the Norwegian bureaucracy, technically, different sub-sections of the CPS recruit and administer the follow-up of foster and emergency homes; to simplify the argument, we refer reductively to 'CPS'. The placement official has overseen placement in both emergency and foster placement contexts.

assimilation' contributes to 'self-fragmentation' (Nielsen, 2013) in minority foster placement alumni and the need for identity affirmation (Haddour, 2005). Beyond the outdated (and offensive) terminology Sartre (Sartre & MacCombie, 1964, p. 27) lays down in mobilising Heidegger's language in describing *Nègritude* as Black people's (another epithet is applied in the original) 'being-in-the-world', the idea that this involves something else than 'whiteness' (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2021) creates an actionable link to the majority homes where our minority youth have taken up residence in conditions that may have violated members of minority cultures' right to 'a culture'. Furthermore, Fanon's insights into the lived experience of being Black in 'a *let's pretend I am White* world' (Cornell & Gordon, 2015) strengthen an attempt to take seriously the meaning African minority citizens in Norway imbue to care orders, transethnic placements, subsequent life trajectories, and the feeling that Black identity has been devalued throughout these processes. The intention here is to go to the heart of the issue of where identity development stands on the ladder of needs that must be considered and reckoned with in the process of determining care order measures and foster placement, and indeed in all the agency's encounters with minority families. In this, avoiding the pitfalls of arguing an essentialism of blackness (House, 2005, p. 54) held out in the earlier writings on *Nègritude* is critical. Going by Sartre, what can be said is, to Black youth, 'denial of racial subjectivity is not available' (Jules-Rosette, 2007) and that subjectivity is coloured by what Fanon poetically refers to as 'a chemical solution [...] fixed by dye' (Fanon, 1967, p. 109). Fanon's project in *Black Faces, White Masks* is to address 'the power of racialised difference to alienate men and women from their true selves', as Max Silverman noted (Silverman, 2005), and the relevance to the present inquiry stems from the frequent experience of fractured and alienating identity development among Black youth in White homes.

Observations: 'Culture' and 'Identity' in Placement

Structural Factors in Transethnic Placement

Keep in mind that from a procedural point of view, the assessment of a child's circumstances cannot be *complicated* by an emphasis on the future ethnic identity development of the child; the right to protection superimposes itself on the process as the most pressing matter (Falch-Eriksen & Skivenes, 2023). By necessity, this relegates issues like the child's cultural rights to a more secondary consideration. In practice, this means that the local availability of 'ethnically matched' foster homes for a particular child is not a circumstance that CPS considers

in assessing the child's 'best interest' and immediate need for protection. The need for protection must be established by independent factors that do not take account of life trajectories or external circumstances. Therefore, as the foster placement official put it: 'CPS is not very concerned with African culture, or the African origin of the placed children. I think that largely has to do with the notion that for CPS, a child is a child, regardless of where it comes from. Moreover, when a child is in an acute crisis, that crisis must be handled. That is about finding an emergency home for the child. Everything about the child's culture and ethnicity assumes second priority'. However, pointing to the structural difference between emergency and foster homes in this regard, the foster placement official works hard to ensure that in her placement cases — 'If we get a Polish child or a child from Kenya or Sri Lanka, we try, to the extent we think it will benefit the child, to match the foster home with the child's background. Maybe one of the foster parents has the same background or something. Things like that. I mean, that's the optimal. That's what we try to do. We have an idea about this, but it's not always possible'. In the question of how minority children's cultural rights can be realised in transethnic fostering, it is important to contextualise the difficulties CPS reports in recruiting sufficient minority foster care families. The foster placement official refers to an increase in African families coming forward. The three parents we cite in this paper share the idea that CPS does not actively recruit minority families. Shamus, who has lost custody of multiple children, exemplifies this view:

They say they advertise for foster parents [...but] don't invest in African foster homes. I asked if placing my children with a family from our background was possible. There was no desire to do that! They're not interested. They want to assimilate children (Shamus)

Another complicating issue is that the transition process from emergency to foster home can be time consuming, resulting from the agency's difficulty in recruiting homes that can care for the needs of individual children. This is attested by the foster fathers, both of whom have emergency home experience. However, the two foster fathers also agree that CPS has come up with very few resources towards the identity development of any of their wards. The three foster alumni we discuss here also report receiving minimal attention from CPS around their identity development, with the exception being a reference to trips to Africa paid by CPS; 'But that was only after my Mum won the court case against them!' The lack of attention to 'culture' (including 'ethnicity' and 'religion') and identity development is widely testified to by our participants.

The Impact of Interethnic Foster Placement on Black Youth

Shamus' statement bridges over to how the parents in our material, as we have said, are typically profoundly concerned that their children should become 'assimilated' and 'Norwegianised' following placement in ethnic majority White homes. They blame the agency for not doing enough to countermand assimilationist tendencies in placement and failure to pay attention to issues like religion and ethnic identity. The idea that assimilation has political overtones is partly why mutual trust remains elusive among minorities and CPS (Wathne & Kisuule, 2023). Parents are aware of the rights according to the Convention and Norwegian law and are aware of and resent that children tend to adopt 'Norwegian values' in these home environments. Shamus speaks to common themes among the parents:

My children are assimilated now. None of them know their language; they have no identity. CPS says they are Norwegian. Taken as a toddler, my boy has lost his culture, language, and religion – eats swine. CPS permitted it! They sent my daughter to a Christian school, claiming that was her wish. How can a small child decide? What can you say when they ask who they are? There's no answer. CPS is not interested. CPS said they'd accommodate the children's culture and religious background, but never followed it up. African children can't be assimilated, our skin colour can't be painted over!

The assimilationist tendencies of interethnic foster placement crop up in every perspective. The foster placement official knows the impact on identity:

Some children want to be Norwegian. Some say, "I want to be White like you" – We're Norwegian, supposed to be White...I worked with a boy who was distraught because he was Black. He thought there was something wrong with him; maybe that was the reason it took so long to find a foster home: because he had black skin. Different from the kids in his community, he had an image of himself...

The foster fathers have seen that Black children fostered by White families tend to adopt majority values, manners, and sociality, well, 'culture' — and, in their view, that is because most majority foster parents are not equipped to and do not receive assistance from the authorities to help the child maintain links to his or her cultural background and steer towards a health identity development.

The Significance of Identity

In as much as care orders are issued to *improve* the circumstances of placed individuals, it makes sense to query the extent to which the foster placement system understands this concept in a life trajectory perspective. Alums of interethnic placement sometimes experience an attestable improvement in life, be it in material or psychosocial terms, following majority home placement. Marion, for instance, expresses that the lack of follow-up around her ethnic identity and culture in the foster home not only resulted in her adopting Norwegian values but has also made her 'feel like a Norwegian – and what's wrong with that?' She has made a conscious choice of abandoning her African identity, she says, just as her African family, in her view, abandoned her: 'My biological father lives there. And some relatives like my grandmother and cousins. But other than that, I feel no connection. That is my choice, I believe. I was hurt so much before. I don't want relations with my aunties. I feel they hurt me. I feel that is a choice I'm allowed to make'.

However, this forgiving attitude is not representative of the sentiments relayed among participants. Rachel's anger is more symptomatic:

I feel that CPS just throws away the children without considering their social and cultural values or anything important to us. When I was [foster placed] in the North, I felt more like an outsider. At home, I felt that my foster parents did not respect me as an African. As children who have been in foster care, we must never forget the culture where we come from.

Kadir has learned to forgive, having suffered horrendously through a rather miserable series of co-ethnic and transethnic foster homes. His testimony deserves a lengthy rendition:

CPS made the first mistake straight away. A family with kids and a dog, Norwegians who eat swine. They should've cast a glance at the boy and found a home within the community so the transition wouldn't be so dramatic.

I had so much fear! They took me out of my mosque environment... It was cruel.

They didn't look at the boy and his religion, language, and culture.

Later, they wanted to find a Somali home – but never investigated. I told the CPS supervisor, but he decided *she was Somali*, and *I was Somali*, and *that should work*. That's too simple! She was Somali – the definition of [makes a sign with his hand], I was Somali – it was good enough...!

Kadir poignantly brings home the sensitivity of the issue, suggesting that minority youth's identity development

requires accommodation and active engagement by the foster care system.

Importance of Accommodating ‘Culture’

Kadir’s sad placement history accentuates how many Black alumni end up uprooted and feeling marginalised from both majority and minority communities.

Just last weekend, this Somali guy verbally abused me for *not* being Somali [enough]. He felt I was so ‘White’, I must’ve had an easy life. I have no feeling of belonging! As a foster child, you learn to adapt; families don’t adapt to you – ‘*This is how we do it in this family!*’ I have often felt it’d be better for me to stay put with my family (Kadir)

In practice, it appears that the responsibility for maintaining focus on the identity development of minorities in care is often not articulated or effectively left to biological parents to see to. The foster placement official added the following perspective:

Children tend to seek back to their parents at maturity. That’s why it’s important to maintain contact. The best thing for the kids is for the parents to say, “*It’s OK for you to live in a foster home*” and maintain good contact. If that works, it tends to be OK. Then, these other issues can be kept a bit to the side. Parents can feel safe knowing their children are not assimilated and won’t turn into Norwegian kids. They can uphold some of their cultural values.

The two foster fathers have, independently of each other, experienced circumstances as both emergency home and foster home parents, where ‘culture’ has been treated with consideration:

I told the [new] foster father, “*He is a Muslim; he doesn’t eat swine. He is used to eating Halal. It will be difficult if he can’t get that.*” I offered to buy halal food and bring it to the foster home. But he had fostered Muslim children before and knew what to do. It’s about showing some interest. “*Where is the mosque?*” If foster parents can’t handle the cultural background of the child, that can be a bone of contention. Foster parents say, “*This is how we do things. OK, that’s your background – this is how we do things!*” That’s how it is in many homes, from what I have seen. You gotta go the extra mile; many foster parents aren’t prepared for that.

This debate boils down to the following: Placed youth might develop healthy identities hinging on ‘adults’ ability to listen, and [...] act upon youth’s concerns’ (Fylkesnes

et al., 2018), and ‘provided that the families are willing to support them’ (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2021).

Discussion: Assimilationism and Cultural Rights of Minority Children

We have problematised disparate outcomes regarding minorities in foster placement. The parents and alumni in this study have lived through experiences in foster placement contexts that many believe have led to their social marginalisation. Many participants have come to question their citizen status (Wathne & Kisuule, 2023). Parents and alumni evince that the Norwegian child welfare system has not been attuned to the needs of minority families, and, as we explore elsewhere, many participants have come to question their citizen status. In contrast, the system seems to defer responsibility for the youth’s identity development to biological parents. As discussed above, structural factors such as availability of minority foster homes complicate the issue, and the child protection system ‘has a long way to go’, as the official put it, to ensure that the cultural rights of minorities are maintained in practice. At the heart of the issue are the effects on life trajectories of living life with a fractured identity and marginalised social connections that see many alumni struggling to find footholds in both majority and minority contexts. Many Black alumni are essentially ‘surviving, not thriving’ (Smales et al., 2020), and, in a phrase, ‘feeling uncomfortably me’ (Ludeke, 2023), as ‘the odd one out’ (Grewal, 2023, p. 62). This experience has been summarised as an incongruence between outer and inner worlds: ‘I am Black, but I don’t feel like I am’ (Ansbro et al., 2023). Or even worse: ‘Despising being Black and ashamed’ of one’s ethnicity (Williams, 2010). Fylkesnes et al. (2018) find that, ‘ethnic minority youth [...] struggle particularly hard to make themselves accountable within the normative structures’ of CPS. This is where insight captured in the evocative title *Black Faces, White Masks* can be summoned. In Fanon’s formulation: It was ‘enough to make me wonder whether I was not being betrayed by everything about me, for the White race would not accept me as one of its own and the Black virtually repudiated me. That is precisely my position’ (Fanon, 1951, p. 54). This has been called ‘the internalisation of self – as-other’ (Hall, 1996, p. 445). Alternatively, as Tsitsi Dangarembga (2022) argues, ‘Thus the melanated people who live in a world of White people – which all of us to a greater or lesser extent do – come to identify themselves as “not-I” [...], or must expend significant time, energy and resources in building up and retaining a healthy sense of their own unnegated, that is, positive being’ (p. 143). Dangarembga writes about her experience ‘as a foster child raised in a White home [...]’ in a Fanon-esque perspective: ‘I always had the sense of [...]

living beside myself, not that of integration into myself. The trauma caused by failure to integrate was so intense and so all-consuming that I could not identify with it, resulting in further distancing from myself so that identification with myself became impossible' (p. 115). Something of this despair was recently captured autobiographically in the Norwegian title *Adopted and Abandoned*: 'Underneath my skin, I was White. I tried to scrape away the black skin, but I couldn't. It was too painful' (Skadberg and Lie, 2023, p. 9, translated). The risk is that this subject ends up living 'its consciousness as a lack', as (Mbembe, 2019, p. 139) formulates it. This harkens back to Fanon's description of the generic Antillean man who returns from the metropole, speaking as it were, 'like a White man' (Fanon, 1961, p. 11) evincing 'a dislocation, a separation' (ibid, p. 14), making the parallels to the foster alumni come of age clear. In this highly complicated issue, where 'minority' and 'youth' voices may not align, the role-players need competent assistance and guidance to ensure the best possible outcome for alumni in a life trajectory scale of measure.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper argues that with a loss of ethnic minority identity markers, interethnic foster placement alumni in Norway end up 'assimilated' into majority Norwegian culture. Life trajectory outcome in interethnic placement is often uprootedness and social marginalisation, with ostracism by members of the original minority group an extra burden. For many alumni, 'assimilation' may not yield resources in the face of life's oppositions, which pile up for many, and a sort of intermediary position seldom amounts to 'getting a start in life': 'Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned' in Fanon's turn of phrase (Fanon, 2008, p. 106). In Norwegian society, becoming 'too white' and yet 'not white enough' would primarily detract from an individual's sense of coherence and belonging. Foster parents, parents, and placement officials do well to help youth make long-term stabilising choices concerning participation in identity processes in foster care. These issues may be addressed through increased recruitment and support of minority foster families, cultural competency training, development of cultural mentorship programmes and support networks for alumni, strengthening cultural rights in child protection policies, and regular assessment of cultural and identity formation needs of placed individuals. Concretely, Norwegian authorities can work to operationalise children's right to 'a culture' in ways that make the concept meaningful in everyday encounters and thus both ensure more clarity for all parties involved and that the right can in fact be claimed. Parents and foster-placed individuals and foster placement personnel need to be equipped with the right ontological tools to relate to this

very complex issue. Future research might fruitfully track cultural and identity outcomes among ethnic minority children in care.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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