Where Do They Belong?—Adoption of Mixed-Race Children in Late 1950s and Early 1960s Britain

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Abstract: This paper analyses the adoption of mixed-race children in Great Britain from formerly colonised or dominion territories after the Second World War with a focus on the late 1950s and early 1960s. It explores the ways in which mixed-race children and their biological, as well as their adoptive families, were treated in the adoption system in order to explore the tensions that arise between adoption and questions of racial belonging. As adoption and its related processes have the ability to profoundly interfere with the most private realms of human cohabitation—the family, this positions the history of adoption right at the interface of the private and the public sphere, offering an ideal background to look at the public as well as the private perception of the (decolonising) British Empire. By taking this specific group of children into focus, it is possible to illustrate the immediate and deeper effect of the race/colour question in adoptions as if under a magnifying glass. In the context of adoption processes, deeply colonial and inherently racist patterns of thought can be found, particularly in adoption records, but also in advice literature.

Keywords: adoption; racism; mixed-race; Great Britain; decolonisation

1. Introduction

In 1952, a researcher working on interracial relationships in Britain wrote:

Everywhere the British . . . resented the sight of a black man with a white woman, reacting rivalrously, sometimes violently as though to an outrage, to the thought that an alien man was being admitted to the closed society, through a woman violating her social trust (Landes 1952).

This statement, as well as other examples such as the oft-cited newspaper article titled “Would You Let Your Daughter Marry a Negro?” (Philpott 1954), which was more liberal in content than other articles from this period, shows the level of white hostility towards sex across racial lines in the 1940s and 1950s. Illustrations of mixed-race families drew on the common narrative of the distant, non-white father to imply that the white nuclear family was at risk (Caballero and Aspinall 2018, p. 353). Such responses were out of proportion to the actual numbers of women and men involved in these relationships, which ranged from casual encounters to marriage (Buettner 2016, p. 264). Though, most of these assessments had one thing in common: counting Black British subjects as aliens, or foreigners, deeming their citizenship and cultural attributes shared with white Britons less significant than their difference in skin colour (Ibid.).

The aforementioned newspaper article also refers to another—quite obvious—aspect of intimate interracial relationships:

There are 1,000,000 Negroes in Britain today. Hundreds more are arriving every month. Thousands of them are already married to white girls. What do relatives and neighbours think about it? How do the children suffer? What is the price in insults, hardships and tears? (Cited in Buettner 2009)

One place where such social upheavals reveal themselves is in child adoptions, as adoption and its related processes have the ability to profoundly interfere with the most
private realms of human cohabitation—the family (Briggs 2012b, p. 22). This, thus, positions the history of adoption right at the interface of the private and the public sphere, offering an ideal background to look at the public as well as the private perception of the (decolonising) British Empire. By taking this specific group of children into focus, it is possible to illustrate the immediate and deeper effect of the race/colour question in adoptions.

Positioning the research subject of adoption within the triad of race, class, and gender (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Hall 2000) creates a setting that allows us to look at the intersectionality of the topic, though these alone are not enough. Additional categories such as age and health as well as domesticity (Bischoff 2018; Burton 2019) also play a role in this context. Similarly, the way children labelled as disabled are dealt with within the adoption system cannot be disregarded. At this interface, the different entanglements that come together in the process of child adoption become even more apparent (Sufian 2022).

For this paper, however, the focus will be on race. The prominent role that race plays in the context of adoption is undisputed. Here, Heide Fehrenbach’s ground-breaking study on black occupation children in post-war Germany and America (Fehrenbach 2018) exemplified how contested notions of race and belonging(s) are in adoption. This is particularly evident in the practice of matching (Herman 2000, 2009), but also in other aspects of the adoption process. Building on these findings, I aim to analyse the adoption of mixed-race children in Great Britain, who had one of their parents from formerly colonised or dominion territories after the Second World War with a focus on the late 1950s and early 1960s. By using the history of adoption during decolonisation as a lens, I want to show how the history of adoption can be linked to imperial history, in order to analyse to what extent colonial patterns of thought had an impact on family structures and society as a whole.

Several factors culminate in the period under examination that make it a particularly compelling phase in terms of how non-white children have been dealt with in the adoption system. Whereas in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a very great distance between the local British population and immigrants from the colonies could still be observed, by the mid-1950s it became clear that closer engagement between the two groups was inevitable. While immigration could initially be perceived as a temporary phenomenon, the social consequences were by then difficult to deny. Especially in the interpersonal sphere, the tensions became more and more obvious, with conflicts culminating in the infamous riots in 1958, both in Nottingham and in the London borough of Notting Hill. At the same time, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan stated in a speech in Bedford in 1957: “most of our people have never had it so good”. The slogan had an air of truth to it, at least for the white middle class after the years of post-war austerity, who saw their homes as the site of new affluence (Webster 1998, p. xiii). Simultaneously, this time marked the beginning of a period in British history in which an above-average number of children from mixed-race backgrounds were placed in the care system.

Anyone working on adoptions will sooner rather than later come up against limits in terms of obtaining sources. Access to adoption files (for understandable reasons) is highly regulated but it is not only in the files themselves that information can be found that allows conclusions to be drawn. Looking in other places, such as in adoption guidebooks—printed for both adoption workers and adopters; newspapers, where the topic of adoption is frequently discussed; as well as in the minutes or paraphernalia of various organisations involved in the process, can be rewarding. Taken together, these offer quite an insightful perspective on the positions, negotiations, and discussions that take place around adoption.

It is equally important to consider the perspective of the adopted children themselves, even though it can be quite difficult to extract the child’s perspective from official sources. This can, however, be overcome through the use of first-person documents from adoptees, such as autobiographical writings in which they have reflected on their experiences of being adopted transracially (Black 2011; Kay 2011). Nevertheless, it is inevitable that one will repeatedly be confronted with missing information in their search for sources. Beyond the perspective of the adopted children, it is also quite difficult to garner information on
the biological parents. Although it is precisely these voids that can also provide clues (Michaelsen 2022). By asking ourselves why exactly this information is omitted, the missing details can be made useful for further analysis.

In this paper, I will first discuss the study of adoption in the context of racism and decolonisation, and then go on to outline the foster care system and adoption in the UK during the period under study. Next, I provide an overview of socio-political developments in the UK in the 1950s and 1960s followed by an analysis of selected case studies of adoptions of mixed-race children.

2. Researching Adoption in the Context of Racism and Decolonisation

Even as new perspectives on the British empire emerged after the First World War, Great Britain was portrayed as a “home” with clear geographical borders, consisting of a homogenous society. The empire, on the other hand, was depicted as a family (Hall and Rose 2006, p. 26). For instance, Percy Hurd wrote in his 1924 book “The Empire: A Family Affair”:

Great Britain is the Family Hearth, the Homeland. Close round it stand the Dominions, the Five Free Nations of the Empire—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Newfoundland . . . the Five . . . owe allegiance to the same Sovereign; have common traditions with the people of Great Britain, a common Citizenship and common interests. All rests upon free consent and good will.

This family metaphor alludes not only to kinship but also to significant dissimilarities between groups and individuals with power differences between them (Hall 2002, p. 19). Hurd continues, “A Dominion is a daughter in her mother’s house and mistress in her own.” and “Crown Colonies are still under parental care” (Hurd 1924, p. 5). This type of familial language portrays social hierarchies as natural and could contribute to viewing the empire as a normal part of everyday life (Hall and Rose 2006) through depictions of different imperial powers as one, big family or the stylisation of Great Britain as mother country with the colonies as her children. While the colonised remained portrayed in familial contexts within colonial discourse, those who migrated to Britain after the Second World War underwent a transition from being seen as part of the imperial family to “dark strangers” (Webster 1998, p. xii).

Children played a distinct role in this context. As mentioned before, the connection between empire and childhood has been examined to some extent within the field of childhood studies (Cunningham 2012, p. 179). Children, both in the “metropole” and in the “periphery”, were seen as central to the imperial project. The special place of children and childhood(s) in British imperial contexts was reflected in the important role that both British children and Indigenous children played in the negotiation of ‘Britishness’ across the imperial context. Further, they also consistently held greater autonomy than they were often attributed (Sleight and Robinson 2016, p. 2).

Indigenous children in settler colonies found themselves subjected to a substantial amount of control through the imperial state to a large extent. Racist assumptions framed them as being a danger to the perceived “purity” of the newly emerging societies and this led to a higher level of public scrutiny as well as interference (May et al. 2016). In Australia and Canada, for instance, children of “mixed-descent” were removed from their families, while Maori children in New Zealand made up a disproportionate number of those living in public institutions (Armitage 1995). These and similar practices show the central role of children and the belief in their malleability in the British empire, but also beyond it (Sleight and Robinson 2016, p. 9). In this context, the (perceived) race of the children frequently played a central role.

These perceptions and instrumentalisations of children can also be found beyond Britain’s time as an imperial power. For instance, the Child Migration Schemes that sent (white) British children to former colonies and dominions and were continued long after the Second World War (Swain and Hillel 2017). Using these programmes not only as a part
of welfare schemes but also quite deliberately as a means to increase the numbers of the (white) British population in those areas (Boucher 2014; Humphreys 1995).

India’s independence and the associated formation of Pakistan on 15 August 1947 are often seen as the beginning of the British Empire’s far-reaching and comprehensive decolonisation process (Buettner 2016; Louis 2006; Darwin 1988; Thomas et al. 2015). Until the 1980s, this development was seen more as a transaction whose consequences and changes were mostly framed within a geopolitical narrative. In later research traditions, under the influence of social and cultural history approaches, other colonial and also post-colonial practices and perspectives began to be examined (Kennedy 2018). These have been extended by the history of emotions as well as transimperial and transnational historical research.

More recent research on British, but also on European imperial history, demonstrates that the loss of empire has had an effect on public institutions and, thus, has instigated developments that may seem subtle at first, but cannot be disregarded (Stuchtey 2017). In his 2011 study Memories of Empire, Bill Schwarz sets out how imperial attachment and post-imperial resentment played an important role in British politics after the Second World War (also: Schofield 2013). The extent to which imperial structures are reflected or have evolved in the British welfare state is explored by Jordanna Bailkin in her pivotal study Afterlife of Empire (see also Bailkin 2015), in which she underlines the conclusion that imperialism did not only impact continents far away or those Europeans actually living “on the spot” (Buettner 2016, p. 7) but also had an influence on the daily culture and society “at home” in Britain (Hall and Rose 2006, p. 16f). The end of empires in the 20th century—both Asian and European—marked the beginning of the largest process of state-building to date, which at the same time gave rise to different notions of belonging, be it state, or ethnic, or to ideals (Thomas and Thompson 2018, p. 2). It should be noted that the question of the actual end of empire is already quite complex, and even after years of academic debates on modernisation, dependency, neo-colonialism, “failed states” and post-colonial conflicts, no consensus has been reached on when exactly the end of an empire should be set.

Given its interests, this paper is located at the intersections between imperial entanglement history (Habermas 2008; Subrahmanyam 2016), childhood history and “critical adoption studies”, and can be classified as part of the New Imperial History, which has emerged since the early 1990s from various interdisciplinary research approaches. Historians and scholars from related disciplines—especially from literary studies and cultural and social anthropology—rejected the previous conventional approach to scholarship that largely ignored the imperial pasts of European states in its work (Buettner 2016, p. 7). Until then, empire research had mostly been conducted by scholars whose interests were mainly limited to methodologically and theoretically traditional fields of investigation such as political developments, the military or economic aspects, with the geographical focus mainly on overseas colonies, supplemented only by centres of power such as London, Paris, Lisbon or The Hague. With the so-called “imperial turn”, researchers’ attention was drawn to the influence of the imperial past(s) on society in the metropolises (Burton 2003, p. 2). Through the New Imperial History, an awareness of the interconnectedness of national and imperial historical research grew. Combining the concepts of “home” and “away” opened up new perspectives, which created an opportunity to expand approaches beyond national borders (Ibid.). The theoretical background of New Imperial History, strongly influenced by post-colonial and post-structuralist thinking, together with its cultural and social-historical approach, is based on the assumption that colonial empires have had a long-term and lasting influence on European societies up to the present day. Here, much of the research is fed by a close connection and linkage between history, literature and other cultural studies. For imperialism did not only have consequences for distant continents or those Europeans who lived or worked in the colonies. It also had an impact on everyday society in Britain and its culture.

It is precisely the complexity of discourses in the private as well as in the public sphere that offers a fruitful basis for examining changing attitudes and perceptions of child
adoption. The public space in which adoptions were negotiated was divided into very different areas. On the one hand, in the correspondence of the adoption agencies, which were either state-run, clerical, or private welfare organisations. On the other hand, of course, in the media, whereby here too a distinction must be made between larger publications and smaller newspapers with a specific target group. However, a wide variety of topics relating to adoption were also dealt with in advice literature, both for adoption workers and for adopters.

The increasing professionalisation and institutionalisation of adoption history offer a rich field of research, whereas the adoption debate in the 20th century was mainly concerned with the influence of the social environment on children and adolescents in comparison to biological predisposition (Stuchtey 2013). The “Critical Adoption Studies” are particularly concerned with the effect of adoption practices in relation to hegemonic narratives about ideal families and hierarchies (Leinaweaver 2015; Homans et al. 2018; Briggs 2012a; Dubinsky 2017; Hübimette 2006; Quiroz 2010; Yngvesson 2010).

Adoption and the processes associated with it have a profound impact on the most private sphere of human coexistence, the family (Briggs 2012b, p. 22). Children and adolescents are restricted in their personal freedom within the framework in which they can make decisions for themselves and are therefore dependent on adults, usually from the family environment (Peters 2016, p. 9). In adoption processes, the public exerts influence on the family’s scope of action and thus assumes interpretive sovereignty over the child’s or adolescent’s well-being. Adoption history can serve as an interface between the private and the public, and thus provides an ideal backdrop for examining their perceptions of empire as well as its changes and interconnectedness to decolonisation processes. The latter, then, can serve as a screen against which to view child adoptions in Britain.

While most research on adoption to date has concentrated on aspects of legal history and developmental studies, I want to make an argument for opening up adoption studies to the fields of social history. How much race as a category is materialised or reproduced in social contexts has been analysed in various works. This is crucial, given that in the context of adoption, different approaches towards belonging or non-belonging need constant re-evaluation (Gill and Jackson 1983; Harris 2006). Mark C. Jerng puts it as follows:

Race is not so much a given as it is something that gets materialized through the uncertainty of relating the individual to the social contexts that precede and condition it. […] Adoption reminds us that racial identification is located in that space of anxiety and insecurity between world and self in which social norms are continually in flux (Jerng 2010, p. 121f).

Adoptions can pose—for this reason—numerous new research questions and investigation possibilities. Most research to this day has focused on transnational adoptions, where the children are transferred from their birth countries to their respective adoptive parent’s homes (Selman 2009). However, there are cases of adoption in which the children do not have to transcend national borders to still be seen as “different” from the family environment they are living in. Here, the research speaks of transracial or transcultural adoption (McLeod 2017). These subtle nuances between the different forms of adoption can be extremely helpful in a detailed analysis. It is precisely at these intersections that the power relations inherent in an adoption process become abundantly clear. In transnational adoptions, in particular, it is common for non-white children to be adopted into white families. This procedure is understood in research as a devaluation of black motherhood in particular, but also of black families in general (Högbacka 2017, p. 12). The same processes can also be traced to transracial adoptions.

For the case of Great Britain, it is unfortunately quite difficult to obtain an accurate overview of the number of adoptions of non-white children in the period examined in this paper, as these adoptions were not recorded separately. This was discussed at length by the Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Council in the early 1960s. Here, a consensus was initially reached that clearly reflects the ambivalence of the situation:
The problem of coloured children in care was discussed at a meeting on 21 April [...] It was agreed that in general it was right for the Home Office to maintain an attitude of not drawing specific, official attention to coloured children as a separate problem from that of other children in care. Nevertheless, it might be desirable by way of conferences and discussions, to disseminate information about the background and customs of coloured communities and use these opportunities for general discussion of special problems arising.9

This line of argumentation is evident in other documents and presented in more detail. In part, this approach also portrayed as a form of anti-discrimination. For example, in the draft final report of the Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Council on “Coloured children in care”:

We have not so far considered it desirable to issue any special guidance to assist Children's Officers and their staffs in dealing with coloured children as it was felt that nothing should be done which might tend (or be alleged to tend) to encourage local authorities to introduce any element of race discrimination into their treatment of children in their care. It seems right to adhere to this principle.10

In the further course of the draft, the reasons against a separate statistical survey of coloured children are also addressed. Here, too, the argumentation sounds similar:

It has not hitherto been the practice of the Home Office to obtain any separate statistics about coloured childre(n) in care and it seems desirable that this policy should continue. It would give offence to publish statistics relating to “coloured” children as a category: if such statistics were to be acceptable at all, they would have to be based on “country of origin” and not merely on colour. This would considerably complicate the compilation of statistics by local authorities and would have to be the subject of prior consultation with the local authority associations. Moreover, since an increasing number of coloured children will in future be born in this country, statistics by country of birth would be misleading.11

In particular, the citing of anti-discriminatory motives against the separate statistical inclusion of non-white persons reads like an attempt to prevent the unequally distributed proportions of non-white children from appearing in official documents. These argumentation structures are reflected in the handling of such children in the British welfare system, as will become evident in the closer examination in the context of adoption later on.

3. Care System and Adoption in the UK

Taking a closer look at child adoptions in the 1950s leads to finding many inherently different actors. For example, in the case of London, the church-based Southwark Diocesan Association for Moral Welfare and welfare organisations such as the Council of the Family Welfare Association were heavily involved. This may seem counter-intuitive at first sight. The reasons behind this scattered field of different organisations dealing with adoptions lie within the development of child welfare legislation in Britain. Child adoptions in Great Britain and Wales were regulated by law for the first time in 1926 following the so-called Adoption of Children Act. Northern Ireland passed a similar law in 1929 and Scotland followed suit the next year (Mignot 2017, p. 144). Before that, there had been various forms of informal adoption throughout all social classes in Great Britain. Neighbours took in orphaned children or relatives took care of children whose mothers had died to allow their fathers to search for a job. Medieval pages or apprentices during Tudor times grew up in families that were not their own, while middle-class families accommodated their nieces and nephews to give them better prospects in life (Keating 2009, p. 39).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Independent Labour Party, as well as the Social Democratic Federation, put questions of childhood at the top of their political agendas. This did not just concern domestic policy, as children were seen as the most valuable “good” of a country and their well-being was a decisive factor in the rivalry between nations (Cunningham 2006, p. 242f). Even though these politics originally had
child labour, poverty and school as central elements, there were many more possible topics surrounding them; this led to a growing number of corresponding laws (Ibid., p. 248).

After the First World War, private welfare organisations such as the National Child Adoption Association or the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child started to place children in long-term families despite adoptions having a rather bad reputation at the time, due to their association with baby farming (Keating 2001; Rossini 2014). After the Second World War, and with the formation of the British welfare state, keeping children with their families, especially their mothers, became a priority. This development can be most certainly linked to John Bowlby’s studies on separating children from their mothers as well as to the studies conducted on child evacuations during the war (Ibid.). Until then, adoptions stayed in the hands of private organisations. Only with the Adoption of Children (Regulation) Act from 1939 and the Adoption of Children Act from 1949, the beforehand independent adoption workers fell under the responsibility of the British social security authorities (Mignot 2017, p. 144).

The period examined in this paper does not include any far-reaching changes in adoption law, yet the issue was constantly debated among the relevant authorities and was always present in political discourses. In 1955, for example, a case came before the Court of Appeal in which a father sought to refuse consent to the adoption of his daughter by the child’s mother and her new husband. His application was rejected with the following words:

The father [of an illegitimate child] is too uncertain a figure for the law to take any cognizance of him, except that it will make him pay for the child’s maintenance, if it can find out who he is. The law recognises no rights in him in regard to the child, whereas the mother has several rights . . . The only father it recognises as having any rights is the father of a legitimate child born in wedlock (Cited in Fink 2000, p. 189).

In addition to the debates in the courts, the Committee on Child Adoption, set up in 1954 and chaired by Sir Gerald Hurst, made an important contribution to the adoption debate in Britain. The resulting report placed an emphasis on the importance of local authorities working closely with adoption societies to contribute to successful adoption placements (Keating 2009, p. 205). In many ways, the so-called “Hurst Report” anticipated later developments. For example, it predicted that—in contrast to current popular opinion—almost every child could be adopted. Furthermore, it is pointed out that the committee was of the opinion that adoptees have a right to receive information about their origins (Ibid.). Although these points were not yet included in the Adoption Act of 1958, which followed the report, it is interesting to note that topics such as secrecy and a further opening up of adoptability were already being discussed in an official context at this time and apparently also found favour.

While the Adoption Act of 1958 did not make any far-reaching changes to existing law, there are nevertheless some adjustments worth mentioning. For example, the consent of the natural father (putative fathers (P.F.)) was no longer necessary for the legal validity of an adoption decision (Fink 2000, p. 190). Before this, however, it was clear how little importance was attached to the putative father’s consent in actual court proceedings, as the previous example indicated. In principle, this Act shows a turning towards the child. Though it was not quite as pronounced as originally recommended by the Hurst Committee, it was nevertheless suggested that not only the health condition of the child to be adopted should be included in the decision-making process, but also that consideration should be taken at the physical and psychological condition of the potential adoptive parents (Stone 1959, p. 502f).

One can hardly write about childhood in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s without addressing the influence of John Bowlby’s studies of evacuated children during the Second World War on notions of childhood and, in particular, healthy child development. Although Bowlby had published studies earlier, it was in the 1960s that his findings provided a conceptual framework, not to be underestimated in importance, for assess-
ing the care of children and the relationship between parents and children (Bailkin 2012; Moisel 2017).

According to Bowlby, children who were deprived of maternal affection and attention were a great danger to society because this led to negative social behaviour such as delinquency, violence or sexual misconduct (Bailkin 2012, p. 180; Hendrick 1993). He summarised this in his 1951 study: “What is believed to be essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother-substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment” (Bowlby 1970, p. xi). In an emergency, a foster mother could take over these tasks, as she would still be better able to do so than the responsible persons in a home. However, even the best foster parents would lack the deep affection, the “absolute obligation to the child which all but the worst parents possess” (Cited in Bailkin 2012, p. 180). These statements are congruent with Piaget’s cognitive development theory, which was gaining popularity at the same time. With the “cognitive revolution”, children were ascribed an active role in their own development, which resulted from active engagement with their own environment (Heywood 2018, p. 185).

It is in the British authorities’ dealings with non-British family structures that the consequences of the concept named “Bowlbyism” become extremely apparent. Although the discussion of Bowlby’s theories concerning foster care in this period is not without controversy (Bland 2019, p. 121), references to them can be found repeatedly. As early as the 1950s, professionals working in the social sector expressed their concerns about the welfare of coloured children whose placement in foster homes or families was far from the Bowlbyian ideal (Webster 1998, p. xv). These ideas of child protection were diametrically opposed to the Home Office’s desire for decolonisation in Nigeria to be as peaceful as possible. In 1960, for example, a children’s social worker in Surrey complained that Nigeria House was placing Nigerian children in inappropriate foster homes (Bailkin 2012, p. 181). However, her complaint was brusquely dismissed by the Colonial Office: “relations with Nigeria are good, the Territory will become independent on October 1st, and it would be inexpedient to make what might be construed as a complaint at official level”. Thus, during this period, debates about decolonisation and child-rearing became intermingled, leading to an extended period of private foster care practice, even if it did not correspond to the current state of science. Traces of this scientification in dealing with children can also be observed in the adoption context.

4. The 1950s—The Beginnings of Decolonisation “at Home”

In the period from the 1950s to the early 1960s, Britain’s perception of empire changed profoundly (Schwarz 2011, p. 6f). Whereas it might have seemed possible to openly defend colonial expansion as a public figure in 1955, standing in this position became more and more difficult with the acceleration of the processes of decolonisation. This does not mean that the empire simply disappeared and went out of the public mind. Far more, there was a shift in focus and an arguably generational difference in the relation to the empire (Ibid., p. 7). Immigration from the former colonies and dominions brought about many changes in the political as well as in the social sphere in Great Britain and the sudden confrontation of the (white) British population with these coloured immigrants was deeply intertwined with colonial preconceptions and ideologies (Buettner 2016, p. 259), such as the concept of the civilising mission (Barth and Osterhammel 2005). This would lead to a new way of handling Britain’s colonial past.

Much of the prejudice of the white British population towards the (former) colonies linked dark skin colour to an alleged inferiority and primitiveness. This was observed at various levels of the social hierarchy and there are numerous narratives from the time that tell of encounters with British people who were convinced that people in the Caribbean or elsewhere lived in trees or thatched huts and wore neither shoes nor clothes (Buettner 2016, p. 260). Sam Selvon, in his 1956 novel The Lonely Londoners, has one of his Caribbean characters say the following about his experiences with the British population:
“you can’t put on any English accent for them or play ladeda or tell them you [sic] studying medicine at Oxford or try to be polite and civilise [sic] they don’t want that sort of thing at all they want you to live up to the films and stories they hear about black people living primitive in the jungles” (Selvon 1956, p. 108).

The post-war housing shortage continued to play a role for migrant communities in the mid-1950s, who were often forced to live in slum-like conditions. At the same time, as in the period immediately after the Second World War and in the early 1950s, interracial relationships, especially between white British women and non-white men, were socially condemned. These conflicts culminated in riots in 1958, both in Nottingham and in the London borough of Notting Hill. Press reports on these events often cited the presence of “black men with white women in pubs and on the streets” as the reason for the violence of white working-class youth (Buettner 2016, p. 264).

This social sentiment was further reflected in the treatment of mixed-race children. After the “brown babies” scandal of the 1940s and early 1950s, the problem of mixed-race children in foster care became increasingly prominent in public perception. In particular, the difficulties in placing these children in adoptive or foster care were repeatedly highlighted in newspaper articles (Caballero and Aspinall 2018, p. 355f). The extent to which these developments can also be reproduced in adoption procedures will be examined in more detail in the following section.

5. “The Child Is Extremely Fair, with Blue Eyes and Gives Not the Slightest Indication of His Parentage”—Case Studies

When trying to trace how mixed-race children were dealt with in the British adoption system, one quickly comes up against limits. As previously mentioned, no distinction was made between mixed-race or Black children by adoption agencies and social workers. Nevertheless, I argue that it is possible to identify nuances in the individual documents and statements in order to approach the topic.

For instance, the Council of the Family Welfare Association wrote in their 1957 annual report on “The Welfare of Coloured People in London”:

Compared with the first year of activity, there has been an overall increase in the number of female migrants and young children. This has caused a certain degree of pressure on our workers as the differences in family relationships provide us with numerous enquiries to help unmarried mothers and their children—mainly due to shortage of nursery places as well as the difficulty of finding foster mothers or adoptive parents.

A report by the Standing Conference of Societies registered for Adoption dating from April 1952 also touches upon the difficulties of finding adoptive families for non-white children. It reads as follows:

Asian, African of half-cast children are difficult to place, as there is a very narrow field of choice among suitable couples of their own race resident and domiciled in Great Britain. While there are plenty of white couples for any white child for whom adoption is desired, the coloured child is likely to be left to other kinds of care, unless a suitable couple of its own race happen to turn up.

This description stands in direct contrast to the statement issued in the same report, stating that many British adopters would not mind adopting children “of foreign descent”, a sentiment found in many reports on transracial adoptions during this era. The placement of coloured children in white adoptive families was a widely discussed topic and within these debates and new understandings of belonging manifested.

The placement of non-white adopted children in white families was a controversial topic. This becomes clear when looking at a handbook for adoption workers, in which the following was written about the appearance of the children to be adopted and their future families:
When adoptive parents are truly accepting of their role, they are unlikely to be unduly concerned about the child’s looks. If people are very specific about appearance, insist on fine bony structure, curly hair, green eyes etc. it is often a danger signal indicating that they are unrealistic, non-accepting of difference, and generally unready for adoptive parenthood. Nevertheless, most parents really enjoy having children who resemble them and adopters are no exception. In fact, especially during the early years, it helps to assuage the wounds of not being able to have a biological child. In the long run, approximate similarity in build and stature is more noticeable than colouring or features. A short, squat child may look and feel out of place in a very tall family just as an exceptionally tall child could be ill at ease amongst all small relatives. This will be particularly true for girls for whom unusual height is generally a discomfort (Rowe 1966, p. 201f).

The handbook goes on to argue:

Looking like parents is not as important as fitting into the whole family group. Most adopted children dislike comments about their adoptive status by strangers and need to feel kinship with their relatives; this is surely harder if the child stands out as obviously different from a family gathering. This is carrying difference to the point of uncomfortable accentuation.

Placing a Negro or Indian child with a white family is an extreme difference which shocks many people. Almost inevitably there will be problems for any child so utterly unlike his parents. If suitable homes with families of the same race were available in sufficiently large numbers, it would be questionable if placement across racial lines would be kind or right for the children, even though it helps to break down racial barriers. However, in England for the Negro or mulatto child it is usually a choice of white parents or no parents at all. These youngsters desperately need the security of a loving home if they are to overcome the rudeness, snubs and discrimination to which, unfortunately, they may be all too often subjected.

These statements are in diametric contrast to the previous paragraph. Transracial adoption is seen as the only viable option for non-white children, painting a very fatalistic picture overall. It is also interesting to note that on the one hand, an attempt is made to present the children’s perspective, although this can of course only be given by an adult in a handbook of this kind. At the same time, the author places herself morally above all of those who discriminate against non-white children.

The final statements of the paragraph then read as follows:

Neither pity nor a sense of duty is a sufficient motive to enable people to make good parents to a child of another race. But when genuine concern leads to real affection, and people love a child for himself and not just because he is black, if for them it is a difference that does not matter, then we must beware lest our own prejudice or rigidity deprive a child of parents.

This very simplistic portrayal of race and the associated experiences of racism, which are equated with the difficulties of a child with a different body type than the rest of the family, does not stand out in comparison to other contemporary reports. Despite the very positive view of the adoption of non-white children, the same guidebook also states: “It will never be easy to place babies who are deaf, crippled or coloured, or older children battered and damaged by their unhappy lives.” (Ibid., p. 142). This one sentence alone makes it clear how different factors are intersectionally connected with each other in the context of adoption. Or—as in this example—placed on par with each other without reflection. The equation of non-white children and children labelled as disabled is a recurring motif in discourses around adoption during the research period, but also beyond. While other categories were crucial, the emphasis here will remain on race in such adoption processes.

There might have been various reasons behind the difficulties of finding permanent care for non-white children but racist attitudes towards the immigrants from the (former)
British empire were most definitely a factor. This meant that non-white couples were often not even considered as possible adoptive parents (Caballero and Aspinall 2018, p. 356). How deeply entrenched racist thinking was for many Britons in the 1950s is similarly evident in the reaction of a mother towards the putative father of her daughter’s unborn child. In a short note made by a social worker at the Southwark Diocesan Association for Moral Welfare in 1955, the worker’s interaction with the mother is described: “Aug. 30th, Mrs. X phoned. P.F. came last evening, she said he was very dark etc. (“a picanniny [sic]”) she cannot understand why X [her daughter] is attracted to him [...]”. In this case, it is also worth noting which nationality is given for the putative father in the questionnaire at the beginning of the file. Under the category of nationality, one sees the entry “half-Jamaican”, which of course describes much more than just national affiliation (all British subjects from Jamaica had the same status as a citizen as those in the UK—Citizen of United Kingdom and colonies). Instead, it is the first indication that the child of this father would not correspond to the ideals of a (white) British baby.

Even when children do not travel across borders, a great variety of factors have an impact on the adoption process. For example, as was the case of the family with the half-Jamaican father. They were forced at the beginning of the process to come to terms with the fact that their child might not be adoptable because of his skin colour. Nevertheless, hopes remerged after their son’s birth. The occasion is marked with the following note in the records of the Diocesan Association: “March, Baby boy born. Fair hair. Blue eyes.”. The subsequent attached letters in the case record show that the responsible worker tries to utilise the light skin colour of the baby as an argument in favour of him being able to be put up for adoption. In a letter to the Thomas Coram Foundation from May 1956 she writes:

Although the putative father is half-Jamaican, the child is extremely fair, with blue eyes and gives not the slightest indication of his parentage. As you mention the difficulty of finding foster homes for coloured children, I wonder if in this case, such a difficulty would arise as the child is so like his mother in colouring.

Later that year in November, she receives an answer from the National Children’s Home and Orphanage to an inquiry about the boy with the half-Jamaican father:

It is true that we are prepared to consider adoption for babies such as he if and when the opportunity arises, which I am afraid is very seldom. At the present time I have no adopters with whom I could place a partly Jamaican baby, only a part Indian child if he is of good background.

This response showcases that not only the nationality of the P.F. played a role in finding a foster or adoption placement but also their social background. Unfortunately, we do not know whether the social worker was successful in the end in finding a permanent placement for the boy.

The last entry in his record from the Southwark Diocesan Association is a response from the Church of England Children’s Society, dated 27 November 1956:

I am afraid I must explain to you that it is not possible for the Society to arrange direct adoption for children with coloured blood, and the matter has, therefore, been passed to the Case Department for attention.

I will enclose a set of our Forms for completion regarding his admission into the Society’s care and if it is found that he is suitable, we would then (try to) place him with fosterparents, with a view to their adopting him later on. As [the boy] is fair, this may well be possible, and as soon as their forms are to hand, I will approach my Admissions Committee for consideration.

This focus—one would almost like to speak of a fixation—on the skin colour of the child points directly to the extraordinary role that attributions of race play in these contexts. Already at this point, a societal development is emerging that will be discussed in great length later in the debates on “colourism” throughout the UK. Even in guidebooks on adoption work, there are whole chapters dedicated to dealing with the (possible) skin
colour of children. In the volume “Parents, children and adoption: a handbook for adoption workers”, one reads the following “tips” in the chapter “What will the child be like” under the heading “Skin Colour”, in order to be able to draw conclusions about the later skin colour of an infant:

The skin colour of mixed-race babies tends to darken as they get older. Some mulatto babies look almost white at birth. If they are going to get darker the process has usually started by the time they are three or four months old. A fairly good idea of their ultimate skin colour can be obtained by the age of six to nine months, but this is by no means infallible as some children will get darker still. One helpful hint is to look at the third joint of the fingers and between the fingers on the back of the hand. If there are dark smudges it is an indication that the child will develop darker skin. If they are not visible the child will probably remain very light. Children of Negro ancestry usually have a distinct colour difference between the back and front of the hands and the tops and soles of the feet (Rowe 1966, p. 101).

This (pseudo)scientific approach can be observed in the preceding passages of the same chapter. This may have been intended to lend more emphasis to the statements. In these passages, reference is even made to Mendel’s law to justify the different shades of skin tones (Ibid., p. 100).

Yet, not only did the (perceived) race of children play a role. This alludes to another important category in the context of child adoptions: gender. In fact, rarely are the so-called putative fathers very seldomly involved in the adoption process nor mentioned in detail in adoption files. If they are addressed, at least in the case studies I have seen—they are basically reduced to their perceived race.

In contrast, the large role of unmarried mothers in adoption contexts during this period stands out again and again. In dealing with them, many different factors that have an influence on adoption can be observed. Ideas about the appropriate behaviour of women clash with idealised concepts of family, but also with class ascriptions and, last but not least, with a particularly strong devaluation of women who have a child with a non-white man. For example, there are whole chapters on “unmarried mothers with personality problems” in adoption guides, in which these mothers are described, among other things, with the following words:

Careful studies of these neurotic young women make it clear that many of them had emotional difficulties long before their pregnancy. Many of them are driven by an unconscious need to have a baby without a husband. […] Inmates of Homes and Shelters and those who seek adoption placement for their children will always include a far higher proportion of these unhappy, disturbed people than will a sample of the total group of unmarried mothers, or a group of those attending a pre-natal clinic in a predominantly working-class area […] It is not rare for these troubled women to choose most unsuitable men as sexual partners, the degree of unsuitability usually mirroring their degree of disturbance. White girls who have illegitimate babies by coloured men are often emotionally ill as well as socially defiant (Ibid., p. 14ff).

Women are not only morally devalued because they have a child out of wedlock, but also because they give their child up for adoption, and this can only happen if to exaggerate—there is a mental disorder or the woman belongs to the working class. The reality that factors such as the social or family environment could play a role is not mentioned in detail. The fact that a direct link is made between the skin colour of the partner and the mental illness and the resulting “social defiance” of the mother offers a direct insight into devaluation and possible justification structures with which the unsuitability of these mothers could be proven.
6. Conclusions

The areas of tension that build up between adoption and Britain’s colonial past and present offer a promising framework for examining the negotiation processes of mixed-race relationships in the period after the Second World War. Here, the negotiation processes of belonging(s) can be closely observed. Deeply colonial and inherently racist patterns of thought are found again and again, particularly in adoption records, but also in advice literature.

Be it from the parents of the birth mothers themselves who refuse to welcome a mixed-race child into their family, or in the extensive treatises in handbooks for adoption workers, which go into detail about tricks that supposedly make it possible to determine the later skin colour of a child immediately after birth. Colonial legacies are present. Nevertheless, it is still quite difficult to reconstruct the perception of these processes from the perspective of the adopted children as well as from the perspective of the biological parents. Here, it might be of interest to include the narratives of adults who were adopted during this first wave of transracial adoptions.

It would certainly be fruitful to extend the research on the adoption of mixed-race children. On the one hand, a longer study period could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex topics. Moreover, an expansion of the group of children studied could certainly generate new synergies. This could be achieved by including all non-white children in the adoption system during the study period in the analysis, or even by broadening the thematic scope to include the foster care system itself.

Furthermore, similar research could be undertaken in the context of other former imperial powers. For example, a study on the connections between racial resentment in the context of adoption in France or Germany would be a conceivable option. Or also in the Netherlands, where the debate on adoption is currently experiencing a new upswing and transnational adoptions have even been prohibited by law.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Hans Böckler Foundation; no grant number available.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the writing of the manuscript.

**Notes**

1. About the particular role of mixed race children in the context of adoption Karen Dubinsky argues: The practices of interracial adoption, and the activism of parent groups such as the Open Door Society, helped to create a public persona for the transracial adopted child, a figure I’m calling the Hybrid Baby. […] I am drawn to the term—which in this context can signify the multiracial origins of adopted children as well as children of one race (black, Native, or Asian) raised by the parents of another (almost always white)—because it can accommodate relations of hierarchy and power as well as cultural change […]. (Dubinsky 2017, p. 60f).

2. On the social construction of childhood see (Woodhead 2008, pp. x–xi).

3. Especially the factor of class affiliations has been thoroughly explored within historical research and is also an important component in adoptions as most adoptive parents were decidedly middle-class or higher, whereas the children were often born to working class or lower-class mothers. For further details see: See (Gill and Jackson 1983).

4. For a definition of adoption see (Homans et al. 2018, p. 1f).

5. The history of childhood has been linked to different imperialisms before. See for instance: (Saada 2013; Boucher 2014; Pomfret 2015).

6. Of course, this kind of familial language was not only used in the context of the British Empire. It was used as early as 1776, in French parliamentary debates on Turgot’s reforms.

7. Canada’s legacy of residential schools has come under renewed scrutiny since the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc Nation announced in May 2021 that it had discovered what was believed to be more than 200 unmarked graves at the former Kamloops Indian residential school.
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