"Brown Babies" in Post-WWII Denmark

A Case Study of the Vulnerabilities of Adopted Children Born of War

Martina Koegeler-Abdi

Abstract

Children born to occupying soldiers and members of a local population during or after conflicts are in many ways an extraordinarily vulnerable population. These so-called children born of war (CBOW) commonly inherit the stigma of transgression and foreignness from their respective parents and face discrimination in post-conflict societies. Their specific vulnerabilities, though, emerge from multiple overlapping factors: the needs and social status of their family members, their relation to the trans/national communities of their parents as well as to ethno-national norms of belonging. This paper theorizes the multiple factors that shaped the vulnerabilities of biracial adoptees in post-WWII Denmark as Black *and* German children of fraternizing mothers. I look at a case from the Danish "child import," the illegal adoptions of children born to African American soldiers and German women in late 1950s Denmark, in relation to the testimony of an adopted child born to a German soldier in Denmark during WWII. The similarities and differences between the two testimonies show that the "imported" biracial children did not just face specific racial vulnerabilities at this intersection between US American and Danish adoption histories but also a relational vulnerability tied to their CBOW status, which manifested through the slow violence of family secrecy practices.

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Martina Koegeler-Abdi

> He [her math teacher] hated Germans. He used to talk a lot about the Second World War, and every time he did so he pointed always at me and said that I was a *tyskertøs* [a German girl].
>
> Regina Juul Søresensen, Danish adoptee born to an African American soldier and a German woman.[1]

Denmark was the second-largest destination country for adoptions of biracial children from US-occupied Germany in the late 1950s, after the US itself.[2] The existence of children born to German women and African American soldiers shaped post-WWII transatlantic racial histories. Scholarship on Black "occupation children" has focused on these children's highly symbolic role in post-war Germany, on the children's experiences with racism in Germany, and their transnational adoptions to the US or the UK.[3] Jim Crow policies in the segregated US army directly affected these children: it made marriage between African American soldiers and German women impossible, thereby denying the children US citizenship and the women alimony.[4] The discontent of returning African American soldiers who could not claim their children born overseas was also crucial to US civil rights work against Jim Crow laws in the United States.[5] The prominent Danish involvement in these early transnational adoption schemes, though, has received little attention outside of Denmark. Danish parents illegally adopted 2000–3000 children, born to African American soldiers and German women during the Allied occupation, under the guidance of the Danish adoption activist Tytte Botfelt between 1956 and 1964.[6] The Danish state did not support these adoptions, but it did not prevent them either. Danish parents seeking to adopt without long waiting times would drive across the border into Germany, pick up a biracial child from a foster home or orphanage and

bring it back to Denmark, where they would eventually be legalized after the fact—a phenomenon dubbed the "child import," *Børneimporten*, by the local press.[7]

The Danish "child import" was supposed to save the children from both German and American racism. According to Heide Fehrenbach, the German government justified these improvised adoptions to Denmark by framing the nation as a racially liberal utopia, superior to the segregated US for the children's well-being.[8] Botfelt, who had adopted a biracial child herself in 1956, echoed this sentiment, as any family in Denmark, in her eyes, would have been better for the children's well-being than remaining in Germany.[9] She then supported thousands of parents with her expertise and contacts, against the wishes of the justice ministry. Her semi-secret operations continued for nearly eight years. The justice ministry only regularized the transnational adoption procedures through NGOs in 1964, after a series of scandals forced the ministry to publicly recognize that these adoptions had, in fact, taken place.[10] In hindsight, it is impossible to say which placement—in Denmark, in Germany or in the US—would have been better for an individual child's welfare. The 35 testimonies of now adult adoptees, collected and published by the journalists Amalie Linde, Matilde Hørmand-Pallesen, and Amalie Kønigsfeldt in their 2013 publication *Børneimporten*, show at any rate that the actual experience of biracial adoptees in Denmark was far from utopic—they faced racism, neglect, and, at times, abuse that went undetected, as there was no official oversight. And in other cases, the placement could also work out well. What testimonies like Regina's in the epigraph above do show is that the adoptees did not escape their racial vulnerability. On the contrary, they instead encountered new, overlapping forms of vulnerability, being stigmatized as Black, German, and a "child born of war" (CBOW) to a fraternizing mother in post-WWII Denmark.

This essay contributes new perspectives to the racialization of Afro German adoptees in post-WWII Denmark through the lens of vulnerability studies. My focus is twofold: first, I analyze how the children's German heritage shaped their racial vulnerabilities as adoptees in Denmark. Regina's experience asks us to reconsider the enduring influence of Nazi German racial ideologies outside Germany, especially in formerly Nazi-occupied European territories—like Denmark—and their intersections with the transnational reach of Jim Crow in Euro-American adoption histories. In a next step, I then explore how these racial vulnerabilities interacted with forms of relational vulnerabilities for CBOW adoptees—specifically, the harm families committed on the adopted children internally to conform to outer family ideals. I draw here on Ellen Gordon-Bouvier's theorization of relational vulnerability as a form of state-created and avoidable harm that materializes through families' attempts to uphold idealized images of themselves, while "masking the realities of the inherently vulnerable human condition within its folds."[11] Gordon-Bouvier's legal analysis

focuses on gendered vulnerabilities that result from women's unpaid care work in the UK today. The family–state–secrecy connection, inherent to her understanding of relational vulnerability, also usefully applies to historical and theoretical contexts in which states not only refuse to take responsibility for gendered, racial, or other vulnerabilities but also relegate those responsibilities to the private realm of families. Secrecy, understood as a practice of knowledge management around stigma or deviations from norms within families, is integral to how relational vulnerabilities materialize. As I will show, private, semi-secret adoptions of children born of war in 1950s' and early 1960s' Denmark could generate relational vulnerabilities, too.

The scholarly designation "children born of war" is an umbrella term that refers to children born to foreign soldiers and local women during conflicts or occupations. Documentation of lived experiences and official policies toward CBOW are rare or often difficult to access.[12] Post-war Denmark is an exception here, as children born to German soldiers as well as adoptees born to African American soldiers have created or co-created testimonies that document their respective experiences. Throughout this case study, I will place Regina's testimony from the *Børneimporten* in conversation with the experiences of Erik, a child already born in 1942 to a German soldier and a Danish woman, whom I interviewed in 2019.[13] Erik's mother was forced into accepting his adoption by relatives in 1952, reflecting a similar lack of state oversight that left it to families to manage any negative repercussions resulting from the child's CBOW background. CBOW tend to be associated with the foreign essence of their fathers and the perceived national treason of fraternizing mothers.[14] Denmark had seen approximately 10,000 children born to Danish women and German soldiers during the Nazi occupation of Denmark, only a decade prior to the "child import." Domestic adoptions were a common strategy of caring for these children while hiding their stigmatized paternity.[15] In my reading, the local histories of CBOW adoptions are an important part of how the vulnerabilities of the next generation of German African American CBOW adoptees materialized. Erik's enforced adoption points to a possible pattern of collusion between state and family secrecy in CBOW adoptions, to deflect state responsibility for "unwanted" children who did not fit into the ethno-national ideal of the family.

In the following, I first locate the specific stakes of CBOW within the theoretical frames of vulnerability studies. The analytical sections then focus on how Regina's and Erik's respective vulnerabilities relate to their status as CBOW adoptees and to their families' attempts to distance themselves from the lingering stigmatization of German parentage and fraternization. Their adoptive families meant to protect them, and themselves, through colorblindness and secrecy in ways that blurred the lines between racial and relational vulnerabilities. Regina's family's colorblindness did not just negate her racialized Otherness, but also the ethno-national stigma attached to

her Germanness. When Regina, a child born in Hanau in 1962 to an unidentified African American soldier and a destitute German mother, arrived as an adoptee in her new Danish family,[16] the national humiliation of fraternization was a fresh memory and "tyskertøs" a slur. Likewise, Erik's adoptive family's secrecy practices were not unlike colorblindness in that they were a conscious refusal to see or acknowledge his German heritage. Despite the differences in their racialization and immediate vulnerabilities, the echoes and similarities between Erik's and Regina's cases represent a compelling focal point for the theorization of CBOW vulnerabilities in Euro-American adoption histories.

Theories of CBOW Vulnerability

I approach the overlaps between Regina's and Erik's experiences as a case study to theorize the entanglements of racial and relational vulnerability in the adoption of children born of war. The historical context and the multiple forms of harm that CBOW may face offer new entry points into vulnerability studies. Vulnerability has emerged as a distinct theoretical concern in different fields since the 1980s, most notably in feminist philosophy and care ethics, social psychology as well as in critical legal studies. The timing was no coincidence. Neoliberalism had begun to latch onto the notion of resilience, an individual's ability to thrive despite being in a vulnerable situation. A neoliberal interpretation of resilience offered a convenient excuse for governments and other institutions to outsource their responsibility for the well-being of the individual while ignoring structural and ideological factors that produced the vulnerabilities in the first place.[17] The field of vulnerability studies evolved as a response to this development, positing that states and societies have a responsibility toward especially vulnerable groups, such as children and the elderly.[18] Neither the conceptual nor the political definition of vulnerability, though, is straightforward. Even though well-intentioned, these initial conceptualizations of "extraordinary" vulnerability soon came under scrutiny for their paternalism and denial of agency to groups deemed vulnerable.[19] The very act of labeling people vulnerable may produce stereotypes of victimhood, but, without recognition of the forces behind dependency and exploitation, harm cannot be redressed either.[20]

The specific vulnerabilities of children born of war are situated within this unresolved tension around victimhood. CBOW in post-conflict societies face stigmatization that can lead to violence in extreme cases and wide-ranging forms of discrimination in everyday life.[21] Family secrecy is a common strategy to manage the stigma, as both families and states try to hide the associations to foreignness, fraternization, and transgression that the physical presence of these children may entail.[22] Social historians have focused on reclaiming agency and visibility for CBOW by documenting their individual resilience.[23] The children's personal traits, their families, and their

environment can all be factors that contribute to resilience, in ways that counter neoliberal interpretations of the concept.[24] However, the possibility for individual success in managing the stigma does not automatically resolve the broader societal pressure that has kept the experiences and historical circumstances surrounding the children's stigma hidden or marginalized for so long.

Rene Provost and Myriam Denov note, from a legal studies perspective, that visibility of CBOW victimhood is important for the success of court cases as well as for public recognition and access to human rights.[25] The prevalence of secrecy in CBOW families, as an individual strategy to protect both the child from immediate suffering and the family from shame, combined with legal neglect, may negate the child a victim status. In many cases, the rights and needs of children born of war then tend to go unaddressed.[26] Visible CBOW victimhood, though, is no simple solution, because "emphasizing the indirect victim-status of CBW may weaken the mothers' victimhood claims, as the harm suffered by CBW is often channeled through the mother in the form of abuse or neglect."[27] The articulation of the child's needs can worsen the mother's situation, since CBOW vulnerability is inherently intergenerational. Conditions that harm the children emerge from social and legal responses to their mothers' vulnerability, who also suffered. Laws in the broadest sense, as parameters that define what a society imagines to be relevant or even real, thus shape the possible terms of cultural and social recognition of CBOW's hidden or secondary vulnerabilities.[28] And the actions of families, not least through secrecy, shape how these terms evolve over time.

Since the early 2000s, the increasing number of published and public testimonies of Danish children born of war has opened a space for reckoning with the nation's hidden CBOW histories. Recognition of the adult CBOW's victimhood can legitimate the involved individuals' neglected vulnerabilities, but the belated memories also reflect the unresolved legacies of the past tensions between a mother's and the then child's vulnerabilities. Many Danish CBOW only started to address past harm late in life, often after their mothers had passed away to avoid potential re-traumatization and as an expression of respect for their suffering.[29] This respect, though, could also be an intimate form of reproduction of relational vulnerability through the accumulative effect of slow violence through family secrecy: if the child knew of and accepted the mother's secret, they also participated in upholding the very norms that caused the mother's stigma in the previous generation.[30] To understand the specific challenges of CBOW adoptees in post-war Denmark, family secrecy practices are, in this light, as important as legal interpretations of family norms, as both tie into Ellen Gordon-Bouvier's notion of relational vulnerability.

The present analysis is based on two adult CBOW adoptees' belated family mem-

ories. There are clear empirical limitations to a case study approach. The two personal testimonies can only point to the role of the state and open questions about the degrees of interconnection between Denmark's domestic and emerging transnational CBOW adoptions in the 1950s. However, a qualitative analysis of secrecy practices within family memories can offer valuable insights into experiences of vulnerability. Memories repeat, re-actualize, and also potentially change how narrative inheritances shape the sense of self of family members, and they may also carry the imprint of the legacies of family secrecy practices—traces of how secrecy has mediated between individual needs and broader social norms.[31] I follow Carol Smart here, who conceives of family secrecy as a practice of knowledge management that may facilitate protection from one kind of social vulnerability while creating conditions for other kinds to arise.[32] Secrets as well as revelations may sustain, build, or change relations within families but also toward different levels of society in that they "create and maintain identities, negotiate intersubjective life, regulate social interaction, and frame institutional practices."[33] Regina's and Erik's family memories in their testimonies are a source that documents the long-term impact of the vulnerabilities they experienced as children.

Racial Vulnerabilities

"Brown babies," the name for children born to African American soldiers and German women in the Anglophone world, became known as "mulatbarn," or mulatto children in Denmark.[34] US American racial ideologies and their hegemonic black/white reference frame certainly followed these children to Denmark, attached to their visible racial difference. Coming-of-age Regina faced severe racialized mobbing from her teachers and peers who beat her up, stole her belongings, and called her "black pig."[35] However, through its translation, the black/white binary blended into, and was changed by, the national Danish racial reference frames as well. Danish adoptive parents may have resorted to colorblindness toward their new family members, but society at large was quick to label these children, who stood out in schools and everywhere as being different, as mulatto children. This term points to Denmark's own colonial past in the Danish West Indies, or at least to the fact that the concept of a mulatto child to describe racial difference circulated in Denmark at the time.[36] Danes, though, used the mulatto concept not just to denote the children's Blackness but also to mark their partial Whiteness. As outlined above, the main association for the perceived "White part" in these biracial children in 1950s' Denmark would have been German Whiteness. Their Germanness connected the biracial CBOW adoptees to the previous generation of Danish German CBOW, coming of age at that time, who were a thorn in the nation's eye: they were White, but their existence represented the racialized/racializing legacies of Nazism's eugenic policies and the shame of their

mothers' perceived sexual and ethno-national treason.[37] Regina's racialization as a "tyskertøs" thus reflects how the reach of Jim Crow intersected with the ethno-national stigma of Germanness attached to Danish CBOW in post-WWII Denmark—a moment of continuity and change for racial vulnerabilities mediated through adoptions.

The Danish child import followed larger patterns of Euro-American adoption history. In Denmark, adoptions had long been a means of child welfare for orphans or illegitimate children as well as an addition of manual labor to adoptive families in the early twentieth century. After WWII, the numbers of domestic adoptees decreased, but expectations of the children fulfilling affective labor for adoptive parents became more important.[38] In the 1950s, domestic adoptions also started to give way to transnational adoptions, which, however, were only fully institutionalized by the 1970s.[39] In these two post-WWII decades, private initiatives and private-public partnerships were the main force behind the first transnational adoptions of war orphans or children born of war from Central Europe, Korea, Japan, and, eventually, Vietnam to the US and Scandinavia. The perceived right of parents to form nuclear families tended to take precedent over the children's interests and parents thereby shaped these emerging transnational processes before they were institutionalized.[40] At the same time, prospective parents also explicitly framed transnational adoptees as vulnerable subjects in need of humanitarian intervention and ignored the fact that many of these children would be racialized within a Scandinavian context.[41] As Barbara Yngvesson highlighted, "Transracial adoption (whether domestic or transnational) makes visible the exclusions on which complete families (and complete nations) are premised."[42]

Vilna Bashi Treitler, from a US American perspective on adoption history, conceives of adoption even as an index of racial vulnerability. The reasons as to why families give up children for adoption as well as the motivations of US families to adopt are, in his view, deeply racialized and racializing, even if these processes tend to be covered up by colorblindness.[43] Colorblindness, "a professed inability to see racial difference,"[44] also shaped the transnational/transracial adoptions of the Danish "child import." Danish media, parents, and adoption activists alike viewed the transnational adoptions as an inherently humanitarian act of saving vulnerable children. Embedded in the humanitarian narrative, media also clamored for the right of parents to form families and dwindling domestic adoptions meant prospective parents *should* be able to adopt from abroad. Kim Park Nelson and Lene Myong capture this national mood of the operation as being about "a need for children/children in need" and identify colorblindness as a key feature in how Danish coverage presented the children.[45] From this perspective, the child import represents a local point of departure: a parent-led movement that would shape future regulations of transnational adoptions

in Denmark in its practices, but which also enshrined colorblindness in adoptions as an operating principle on this side of the Atlantic. To this day, adoptees still face the expectation to adapt to Scandinavian norms of Whiteness, even though many of them have become more outspoken and critical about colorblindness since the 1990s.[46]

The Danish child import, though, does not just index the future racial vulnerability of the children within and through colorblindness. It also points to past root causes of their racial vulnerabilities, the reasons why the CBOW were given up/collected for adoption, due to the entanglements and proximities between miscegenation and fraternization. Regina's and Erik's immediate vulnerability in their birth families is directly tied to the situation of their mothers and a response to their fraternization as an act of sexual and ethno-national transgression. We have no direct access to their mothers' stories. Their fate was, however, an important part of Regina's and Erik's respective recovery of hidden family history and informs both their own memories as well as their interpretations of the circumstances surrounding their births. Looking back as adults, they express understanding for their biological mothers' precarious situations, even though they both suffered the consequences.

Regina's mother Elfriede worked at the US military base in Hanau in the 1950s and 1960s. During this time, she had multiple relationships with US service men. Looking back, Regina thinks her mother hoped that one of them would marry her, to lift her out of poverty. Marriage never happened, though, and her relationships resulted in eleven children from different US soldiers. Elfriede put all of them up for adoption, at times also at the direct intervention of German authorities who took malnourished children from her. While some of her children remained in Germany, most of them ended up with adoptive families in Denmark. When Regina was nine months old, a Danish woman named Inger Lise came to pick her up at a German orphanage.[47]

Erik's mother, on the other hand, had an affair with a German marine soldier during WWII and became pregnant. The soldier still recognized his paternity but was soon drafted again and ended up dying during a battle at sea in the English Channel in 1944. As a single mother with an illegitimate German Danish child, Erik's mother was in a highly vulnerable situation at the end of the German occupation. As Erik learned much later in life, her extended family wanted to ensure that his German paternity remained a secret to anyone outside the family and to himself. This secret protected the family's status but forced his mother to abandon her relationship to Erik. When Erik's mother married a Danish man after the war, her new husband did not want the "German child" in his family. His mother therefore placed him in the care of Erik's grandmother's sister's family. She continued to see him occasionally, but Erik never returned to her, even though her marriage fell apart quickly.[48]

Regina's and Erik's respective loss of their birth parents reflects the similarities in how the involved states and families responded to children born out of unions characterized as miscegenation and/or fraternization. Elfriede suffered from the stigma attached to interracial sex, to illegitimacy, and to poverty in post-war Germany. While Erik's mother had not had interracial sex, she faced not only illegitimacy and poverty but also the stigma of a specific, ethno-national sexual transgression through her fraternization with a German soldier during the occupation. It is important to note the differences between miscegenation and fraternization here. Miscegenation emerges out of a distinctly US American racial history of chattel slavery and cannot be equated with fraternization. Local New York politicians invented the scientific-sounding term in a parody pamphlet during the 1864 US presidential elections to denote the "unnaturalness" of interracial sex.[49] The new concept caught on quickly, shaping legal practices in local courts until the US Supreme Court officially recognized interracial sex as a felony in 1880.[50] This new legal framework was a pillar of White supremacy in the post-Civil War era and remained in place until the Supreme Court ruling of *Loving vs Virginia* in 1967. Fraternization, on the other hand, is a less specifically confined historical phenomenon. Wars and occupations have always led to forms of sexual contact, where the lines between coercion and consent are often difficult to draw. The legal, social, and political impacts of fraternization shift with the context of the given conflict, but women, and their eventual children, were commonly stigmatized for sexual contact with foreign enemy soldiers.[51] Despite these distinct contexts, state responses to both fraternization and miscegenation may function as processes of racialization, in that they police sexual and racial/ethno-national boundaries in intimate relations.

During the Allied invasion of Germany and the ensuing post-war occupation, miscegenation and fraternization blended into one another. The US army only allowed a "proportional" number of Black soldiers in segregated units and applied miscegenation policies within its reach. In their off-duty time in Europe and Japan African American soldiers could fraternize with local women.[52] However, the existence of miscegenation laws at the time meant that "deviant" sexual relations still limited their access to civil rights.[53] The reach of these laws, for example, barred biracial CBOW in occupied Germany from US citizenship.[54] Acts of fraternization during WWII were clearly distinct from miscegenation at large, but in Denmark they were also racialized—albeit in the ethno-nationalist, eugenic terms of Nazi Germany. Nazism regarded children born to German soldiers and Dutch, Danish, or Norwegian women as racially "valuable" and supported these children and their mothers' relations during the occupation period.[55] The Danish public framed the fraternizing women either as prostitutes, rape victims, or Nazi collaborators, while, as Anette Warring's research has revealed, the vast majority of the "German girls" had romantic relations with soldiers.[56]

The voluntary nature of these sexual relations increased the perceived injury to Danish ethno-national honor, and it also moved the social impact of Danish WWII fraternization closer to US miscegenation policies. The post-war backlash against fraternizing women was fierce across formerly German-occupied nations, with women being shorn in public, dragged through streets, and shunned at workplaces or in homes.[57] The backlash also affected children born to such unions. Families thus tried to hide any visible traces of German paternity. Mothers often moved to different towns, left children with their Danish grandparents, or married Danish husbands who would accept the children as their own.[58] However, if a CBOW's German paternity was outed in schools or elsewhere, they, too, suffered severe harassment as a "Nazi child."[59] For the "mulatto children" in Denmark, the stigma attached to fraternization and miscegenation intersected directly in Regina's racial vulnerability. Her visible Blackness at the time also denoted her Germanness and her mothers' fraternization. When Regina's math teacher used the slur of her being a "tyskertøs," he framed her as a projection screen for her mother's sexual transgression. Elfriede's relation with an Allied soldier played out in a different racial context than the fraternization of Danish women with German soldiers. Her teacher nevertheless applied the inherited stigma of her mother's fraternization transnationally, transracially, and across these distinct generations of children born of war.

Despite the differences between family secrecy and colorblindness, both are practices of knowledge management regarding perceived stigma within families, meant to protect the children *and* to mitigate the impact of their children's deviation from a norm on themselves. Erik did not face racial vulnerability, narrowly conceived, due to a visible difference. Erik's adoptive family could resort to secrecy around his German paternity, which enabled him to pass as "just" Danish. Even Erik himself had no idea that his father had been a German soldier until after the death of his adoptive parents in the late 1970s. There were moments of near-revelation for Erik coming-of-age, when, for example, a teacher used his German name Heinrich at a roll call. However, since his adoptive parents had a high status in the local community, the teacher chose to protect the secret and quickly said to the class that they all knew Heinrich as Erik and moved on. Regina, on the other hand, not only experienced explicit racism but also suffered from her family's colorblindness, the non-recognition of her discriminatory experiences in and outside the home. Their respective family's management of the stigma attached to fraternization and the children's ethno-national deviation as a *German* CBOW connects Regina's and Erik's experience in a grey zone between racial and relational vulnerability that affected them both. Going beyond a racial vulnerability tied to the visibility of an ethno-racial difference, I thus explore in the next section how practices of colorblindness and family secrecy, as knowledge management between families and society at large, co-created conditions for rela-

tional vulnerabilities for the CBOW, their birth mothers, and adoptive families in both contexts.

Relational Vulnerability

Secrecy and vulnerability are closely related. *Børneimporten* records biracial adoptees' individual, embodied vulnerabilities, but it also analyzes Botfelt's administrative practices that enabled her to facilitate the child import as an open secret that state officials chose to ignore. The Danish justice ministry consistently neglected to curb Botfelt's activities, while various lower administrative branches collaborated on legalizing the imported children as adoptees after the fact.[60] If a placement failed, Botfelt tried to take care of the issue internally with the help of other parents.[61] Mutual secrecy thus enabled parents to proceed with their desired adoptions, while the state avoided official responsibility for the children's well-being. The domestic placements of German CBOW just a decade prior reflected similar patterns. After her divorce, Erik's mother moved to Copenhagen, while he remained with his foster parents in a small Danish town on the countryside. By 1952, when Erik had just turned 10, his foster parents wanted to officially adopt him. He remembered signing some papers himself during the process, but he only learned after the death of his adoptive parents in 1978 that they had forced his biological mother to give up custody. His older brother later told him that his adoptive father travelled with local police to Copenhagen and threatened his mother to "sign this, or he would tell her connections in Copenhagen that she had had a child with a German."[62] After this, his mother ceased all contact to him, and Erik only saw her again as an adult.

Secrecy in adoptions can revolve around the protection of mothers or the question as to whether or not the children themselves should know they are adoptees.[63] The cases of Regina and Erik show how a state might tacitly support family secrecy in and around adoptions of children born of war for other reasons, for example, to resolve a situation where children are desired for adoption but do not fit into an imagined ethno-national family ideal. The Danish state may not have had a set of norms or policies ready to understand and regulate transnational/transracial adoptions in the 1950s, but it had just collected extensive experience in how to hide German paternity of children born during the WWII occupation of Denmark—also through privately initiated and locally arranged adoptions, as in Erik's case. This experience might be part of the reason as to why it took the Danish justice ministry more than seven years to even acknowledge and then regulate the transnational adoptions of biracial German foster children. It is unlikely that the Danish state, designated internationally as a racially liberal utopia, would have openly objected to the presence of differently racialized children. The justice ministry thus may have simply expected adopting families to manage any consequences a perceived deviation from the Danish eth-

no-national family ideal may have caused on their own—just as families with German CBOW had done.

Following this hypothesis, I read the absence of state oversight in both the domestic adoptions of German CBOW and in the transnational adoptions of CBOW from Germany to Denmark as a way for the state to avoid responsibility. More research, which is beyond the scope of this paper, is necessary to establish empirically whether the similarities in these two approaches were a conscious choice, but the documented impact of interrelated state and family secrecy practices on Regina's and Erik's cases shows that these practices produced a distinct kind of relational vulnerability in both contexts. The first thing to note is that the state was not entirely absent. As Gordon-Bouvier argues, the "state is never truly *absent*, no matter how minimally it protects its subjects."[64] The neglect to regulate the child import is also an active choice of deciding which children not to protect. And in Regina's as well as Erik's adoption cases, the families needed local authorities to finalize adoption proceedings. Erik's adoptive father even enforced his adoption with the help of a local police officer, in an apparently agreed understanding that this was in the best interest of the child, the family, and presumably the broader national interest. And yet, by keeping it local, the cooperation with authorities could unfold without official recognition and responsibility. Family laws and child welfare provisions, like adoption procedures, may strive to be impartial and humanitarian in official terms, but Gordon-Bouvier stresses they are always also interpreted through or against normative family ideals in practice.[65] Local interpretations and enforcements of family law could also help erase the visibility of German paternity, as Erik's adoption case exemplifies.

Relational vulnerability, as a theoretical lens, further calls attention to the ambivalent role of the mothers in these CBOW adoptions, the ways their biological *and* adoptive mothers could experience and pass on vulnerabilities to the children by protecting themselves or their interests. Despite their different situations, neither Erik's nor Regina's biological mother had much choice but to agree to the adoption. Without sufficient financial means or protection against the backlash due to their fraternization, they could not afford to keep their children even if they had wanted to. And while Erik's adoptive parents' high social status appears to have insulated them from any repercussions from the semi-legal adoptions, Inger Lise (Regina's adoptive mother) had no such privileges. The Danish couples seeking to adopt biracial CBOW wanted, above all, to achieve a nuclear family. If the child placement did not work out for any reason or the marriage broke apart, mothers faced their own relational vulnerabilities formerly hidden through the institution of marriage. In her recollections, Regina characterizes her first years in Denmark as the happiest of her life. When she was seven years old, her adoptive parents divorced. She experienced the divorce as a key event for her personal vulnerability. Regina moved with Inger Lise to a differ-

ent town, even though she had a much closer relationship to her adoptive father Flemming, while her older siblings stayed with their father to finish their schooling.[66] Although the adult Regina acknowledges that her mother suffered from depression and vulnerability after the divorce, the new situation left her exposed to her adoptive mother's struggles. Inger Lise started a daycare institution to maintain herself, and from age seven onward Regina was expected to help with everything, from changing diapers to cleaning up. Regina notes, in hindsight, she felt like "a little slave."[67] She describes the relationship to her mother as not feeling like a loved daughter but fulfilling a service function instead. Inger Lise's divorce exposed her gendered relational vulnerability, but its consequences doubled down on Regina's personal racial vulnerability.

Regina's and Erik's memories invite us to conceive of relational vulnerability more broadly, as an intergenerational mediation of harm through practices of family secrecy revolving around their racially or ethno-nationally undesired paternity. Gordon-Bouvier's theoretical focus on the harm that mothers inflict upon themselves, by hiding vulnerabilities to fulfill national family ideals, does not fully address the ways in which these expectations and a state's lack of intervention can ripple further within families and across generations. Family secrecy is a highly ambivalent practice of knowledge management that can both protect and harm vulnerable members of the family, either simultaneously or at different moments in time.[68] For example, family secrecy protected Erik as well as his adoptive family's reputation in the short run. However, it nevertheless caused long-term harm through what Ashley Barnwell describes as the slow violence of family secrecy. Barnwell uses the concept of slow violence to highlight how unseen harm can accumulate in families through certain kinds of secrecy over time, for example, if family secrecy cuts off family members from each other, if it burdens future generations with discriminatory legacies from the past, or if it makes families complicit in reproducing the harmful norms the family sought to evade through the secret-keeping itself.[69] By paying attention to these forms of slow violence through family secrecy practices, we can also trace the transfer of the mothers' relational vulnerability to their children.

Erik's and Regina's racial vulnerabilities differ, but, as adopted CBOW in Denmark, they inherited the impact of their mothers' relational vulnerabilities in similar ways. The adoptions themselves cut off the family line between the birth mothers and Regina and Erik for decades. Their biological fathers were already twice removed, mostly present in the inherited stigma that still shaped the children's lives. Regina has never met her African American father. And since Erik only learned late in life about his German father, he was no longer able to meet his German grandmother, who had already passed. His experience with Danish state archives further indicates

that the expectation that German CBOW paternities stay hidden as a family matter persisted well into the 1990s. Erik then searched for more information on his German father in the national archives, but he experienced what he perceived as intentionally misleading information from staff. An employee told Erik over the phone that there was no paternity record for him available—even though, as he knows today through the archive's logs, that information was present and had been viewed by staff that very day. The official appears to have been unwilling to disclose information on a German Danish paternity case. Even though this is just one case, it shows that national interests in decreasing or hiding the visibility of CBOW histories had not yet entirely disappeared.

Finally, children who inherit relational vulnerability through the slow violence of family secrecy can break its further transmission, at least to future generations, by acknowledging, as adults, the hidden family lines and their own former suffering. For example, Regina proudly highlights her personal resilience and that, with the support of her art teacher and occasional visits to her father, she managed to make it through to adulthood. And even though she never revealed the extent of her personal struggles to anyone else until late in life, she managed to find and meet Elfriede in 1999, through the initiative of some of her other adopted siblings. Regina expressed relief and satisfaction that she finally better understood her roots after the meeting.[70] Erik became an active member of the Danish war children association, which managed to secure the right of CBOW to see their own paternity case files in the Danish archives and through which he has recovered much of his formerly hidden family history.

Conclusion

Children born of war, in the past as well as today, face multiple, interconnected vulnerabilities that materialize beyond binary perceptions of victimhood, protection, and harm. By analyzing the similarities and differences in the vulnerabilities of two adopted Danish CBOW from different, yet related generations—Regina, the child of an Allied African American soldier and a German woman, as well as Erik, born to a German soldier and a Danish woman—this case study has contributed a novel historical and theoretical perspective to Euro-American adoption history. The connections of racial and relational vulnerability between the two CBOW adoptees highlight that the Danish child import was not just a point of departure for a future colorblind transnational adoption movement, but also a point of continuity and transfer within Danish and US American adoption practices. Or, to put it differently: without Jim Crow, without the presence of African American soldiers in occupied Germany, and without the refusal of the US army command to recognize these children as US citizens, they would not have been available for adoption in the first place. Instead, the subsequent

fate of these children was decided in Denmark. Regina's experiences show that the legacies of Nazi German, eugenic racial ideologies, the entangled stigma of miscegenation and fraternization, as well as the local historical precedent of the domestic adoptions of German WWII CBOW to hide their paternity, as in Erik's case, shaped her racial vulnerability as a German "mulatto" adoptee in Denmark.

These historical perspectives in themselves then offer a conceptual entry into theorizing vulnerability in a context that precedes the predominance of neoliberalism. The current theoretical debates in vulnerability studies often wrestle with the question of how to best counter the neoliberal privatization of harm.[71] However, the post-WWII experiences of adopted children born of war in Denmark remind us of the impact and possible continuities of older forms of state out-sourcing of responsibility for the vulnerable through the social institution of the family. Relational vulnerability theorizes how families may hide internal vulnerabilities to comply with larger societal norms or state expectations. The present case studies exemplify this approach and add a thus far undertheorized, intergenerational perspective to the concept of relational vulnerability, in that the slow violence of certain family secrecy practices may pass on hidden harm to next generations. Family secrecy, as an ambivalent practice of knowledge management, enabled families to live with their adopted children's perceived deviation from ethno-national norms, but at the cost of creating other forms of relational vulnerability that would affect their children for decades to come. The experiences of adopted children born of war are just one of many contexts where uneven access to power and dependency in intimate relations blurs the line between protection and harm. The Danish post-WWII approach to CBOW adoptions is nevertheless a pertinent case to call for more attention to the ambivalent role of families in mitigating and reproducing vulnerabilities for children whom governments refuse to support or even recognize.

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Notes

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