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Research Article

From compliance to refusal: White childhoods and abolitionist imaginaries in early childhood education and care

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Abstract: This paper introduces the concept of white childhoods as a critical framework to examine how whiteness, coloniality, and racial capitalism shape early childhood education and care systems in Europe. Dominant norms of childhood, rooted in white, middle-class, heteronormative, and non-disabled ideals, structure how children are seen as emotionally legible, developmentally "normal," and worthy of institutional care. Racialized and migrant children are often positioned as deficient, with their languages, cultural practices, and family structures rendered unintelligible or threatening. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Syrian mothers and ethnographic observations across Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, the paper maps how white childhoods are enforced through language policy, affective expectations, and maternal surveillance. Beyond critique, the paper uses short speculative vignettes to explore abolitionist futures in which care is collective, multilingualism is embraced, and belonging is not conditional. These speculative fragments are grounded in the lived experiences and quiet refusals voiced by migrant mothers, treating imagination as both method and political strategy. Rather than seeking inclusion or reform, the paper calls for dismantling the racialized logics of early childhood education and care and for building educational spaces grounded in relationality, cultural sovereignty, and joy. Abolition here is framed not as utopian idealism but as a pedagogical and methodological commitment to living otherwise.

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Introduction

> The centre does not help. They tell us to focus on speaking German with our child, but we want to keep speaking Arabic at home, too. We would like our child to learn German, of course, but why can our child not speak both? The people at the centre make us feel like speaking Arabic to our child will ruin his life! *(Sara).*

Spaces intended for children are often colourful and inviting on the surface, yet they are presented neutral spaces, as if always aligned with children's best interests (Balagopalan, 2002; Burman, 2008;). However, the question of who decides what is best for children, and how to achieve that goal, remains complex. Although global discourses on children's rights emphasize the importance of equitable childhood experiences, this ideal remains far from reality (Abebe et al., 2022). A dominant understanding of childhood, produced through colonial legacies, whiteness, racial capitalism, and racism, has been instrumental in determining what is considered best for children (Bhattacharyya, 2017; Burman, 2008; Ferguson & Vogel, 2017; Gerrard et al., 2022; Wynter, 2003). This understanding privileges childhoods rooted in Western, middle-class, white, heterosexual, and non-disabled experiences and values. This understanding privileges childhoods and leads to the marginalization of "othered" childhoods that do not align with these dominant narratives (Spyrou, 2019). This marginalization becomes particularly evident when we consider migrant or refugee children.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) systems, including childcare centres, preschools, and kindergartens, play a crucial role in children's early lives. These systems significantly impact children's

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cognitive, emotional, and social development, shaping their experiences of the world and how they are perceived by it (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Lenaerts et al., 2018). Consequently, ECEC systems are essential for examining and challenging the colonial, racial, and patriarchal structures that define what is deemed "valuable" in children and their families. While children across the globe are affected by hegemonic approaches to childhood, the harm of these approaches is apparent when we look at children from families who have recently migrated, particularly to Western contexts. Children from migrant or refugee families can be devalued and viewed through a deficiency lens, where their strengths and those of their families are overlooked or diminished compared to children and families that align with the colonial and racist logics of education and care (Spyrou, 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015).

Therefore, this paper first establishes and brings together the elements contributing to a hegemonic approach to childhood, which we term the "White Childhoods" framework. White childhoods refers to the dominant and hegemonic model of childhood rooted in Western, middle-class, white, heterosexual and non-disabled norms and experiences that are upheld through colonial legacies, whiteness, racism and racial capitalism. We present ideas drawn from post-colonial thinkers working on children, families, ECEC, migration, racial capitalism, whiteness, and racism to offer a comprehensive approach to analyzing how white childhoods harm "othered" children and their families. Thus, in this paper, we examine white childhoods as a structuring force in ECEC by presenting three case studies on ECEC and migrant children in a Western European context. We focus on Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany to illustrate how white childhoods operate and the harm they cause. Building on Wynter (2003), Burman (2008), Bernstein (2011), and others, we argue that white childhoods function as a structuring force within global ECEC systems (Ahmed, 2012; Hage, 2012; Wekker, 2016). At its core, this framework aims to reveal the harmful structures present within ECEC. White childhoods function as a dominant yet invisible ideal, upheld through whiteness, colonial governance, and racial capitalism. Ultimately, the reshaping of policies, practices, and expectations othering those who do not conform. This paper critiques these processes, highlighting how ECEC systems reinforce whiteness by essentializing identities, erasing cultural practices, and devaluing multilingualism.

However, the paper does not stop at critique; it also moves towards imagining otherwise (Love & Muhammad, 2020; McLeod, 2018), envisioning futures in which white childhoods are not the primary structuring force. Instead, it centres futures where ECEC systems are communal, relational, and equitable—where all children and families are celebrated, and their relational autonomy, collective well-being, and diversity are recognized as strengths (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017). In this way, it departs from normalizing white childhoods towards spaces where everyone can thrive in their full diversity. First, it critiques white childhoods by analyzing present-day interviews, revealing how this framework functions within ECEC systems to other non-Western children and families (Abebe et al., 2022). Second, it explores relational futures through speculative, future-oriented interviews, proposing alternative models of care and education that centre joy, liberation, and equity (Cullors, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012). By adopting this dual approach, the paper does more than diagnose harm; it envisions abolitionist alternatives and disrupts white childhoods. The aim is to create a future in which children and families are no longer judged by colonial standards but are empowered to thrive in their full humanity (Davis, 2003; Wynter, 2003). Consequently, the paper does not argue for policy reform but instead calls for dismantling and reimagining education and care in new ways.

The paper unfolds in four parts: first, it defines the concept of white childhoods and how it operates as a structuring force in ECEC systems. Second, it outlines the methodological approach, including speculative interviews grounded in migrant experiences, that both diagnose harm and imagine otherwise. Third, it presents three national case studies (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany), highlighting how white childhoods shape everyday practices. Finally, it offers abolitionist futures and calls for reimagining ECEC beyond the logics of white childhoods and state control (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015; Stovall, 2018).

Theoretical Framework: White Childhoods and Abolition

White Childhoods, Innocence, and the Logics of Care

The concept of white childhoods in this paper names how particular norms of childhood, defined through whiteness, Western developmental ideals, and capitalist temporalities, are naturalized as universal (Balagopalan, 2002; Gerrard et al., 2022). Building on the work of Burman (2008), Abebe et al. (2022, Wynter (2003), and Blommaert (2010), we understand white childhoods not as a descriptor of individual children but as a structuring force determining which children are seen as deserving of protection, resources, and recognition. Historically tied to white, middle-class, non-disabled, and heteronormative ideals (Puwar, 2004; Wekker, 2016), this regime of innocence functions as an invisible baseline against which all other children are measured.

In this framework, whiteness refers not only to phenotype but to a relational position within a system of meaning and value (Ahmed, 2012). In this paradigm, only children presumed developmentally coherent, emotionally legible, and linguistically compatible with the nation-state are seen as worthy of investment, rendering many racialized and migrant children unintelligible (Bernstein, 2011; El-Tayeb, 2011; Ghorashi, 2010). Their emotional expressions may be pathologized, their home languages treated as developmental threats, and their families cast as inadequate or dangerous. Hence, care within ECEC is never neutral; it is selective, disciplinary, and racially inflected (Kremer, 2007; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015; Rudolph, 2023).

Historical Continuities: Coloniality, Integration, and Linguistic Hierarchy

The dominance of white childhoods in European ECEC must be seen as part of a more extended colonial history in which education served as a site of racial and cultural discipline (Balagopalan, 2002; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015; Stoler, 2020). Colonial schooling systems sought to "civilize" Indigenous and racialized children by repressing languages and cultural forms deemed illegible to the colonial state (Depaepe, 2017; wa Thiong'o, 1986). Contemporary ECEC practices in Europe, though often described as inclusive, continue this legacy, demanding linguistic assimilation, emotional conformity, and alignment with white national values as prerequisites for belonging (El-Tayeb, 2011; Grosfoguel, 2011). In the Belgian, Dutch, and German contexts, language is framed as central to integration, but success is measured by how well families adopt the dominant national language and cultural norms. Children who arrive speaking Arabic, Kurdish, or Turkish are assessed for how quickly they can become fluent in Dutch, German, or French (Agirdag et al., 2016; García & Wei, 2014; Jaspers, 2008). Their home languages rarely feature meaningfully in the classroom and are often met with suspicion. As Blommaert (2010) contends, linguistic hierarchies act as gatekeeping mechanisms, regulating who belongs and who remains marginal (Blommaert & Rampton, 2015; Yıldız, 2012). In such contexts, multilingualism is welcomed only when it involves prestigious European languages; otherwise, it is seen as a deficit.

Beyond language, migrant children may be deemed delayed or difficult based on emotional or developmental markers measured against white, middle-class norms (Burman, 2008; Bernstein, 2011). For instance, a mother might be told her child is "too shy" or "not smiling enough," without consideration of the family's displacement, linguistic transitions, or cultural differences. This underscores how innocence, taken for granted in white childhood, is not automatically extended to racialized children (Ahmed, 2012; Gillborn, 2005; Rudolph, 2023). Instead, they are frequently monitored under logics of suspicion.

Abolitionist and Decolonial Theory as Method and Futurity

This paper draws on abolitionist and decolonial scholarship as both a critique of ECEC systems and a methodology for imagining otherwise. As Gillborn (2005) and Davis (2003) emphasize, abolition is not just about dismantling oppressive systems but about creating life-affirming alternatives (Cullors, 2018; Simpson, 2017). In the educational sphere, this means moving beyond attempts to improve systems that were not designed for racialized communities, and instead designing structures rooted in collective care, joy, and radical relationality.

Following Love and Muhammad (2020), we conceptualize abolition as a pedagogical and methodological practice. This involves refusing carceral logics, extractive data collection, and universalizing frameworks (Ben-Moshe, 2013). Love's (2019) explanation of "freedom dreaming" is particularly relevant here: it suggests that we continue to imagine liberation even while entangled in structures of harm. In this paper, speculative interviews serve as one freedom dream tactic, capturing the desires and visions mothers articulated but could not fully realize in the present (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017; Puar, 2017). Bhattacharyya (2017) argues that racial capitalism cannot be fixed through policy alone. However, it must be confronted at the level of social reproduction, which informs the focus on how families already practise care beyond the state, via informal networks, language preservation, and refusal of standard norms. Although educators and policymakers often view these practices with suspicion, an abolitionist lens recognizes them as early, practical models for building life beyond state control.

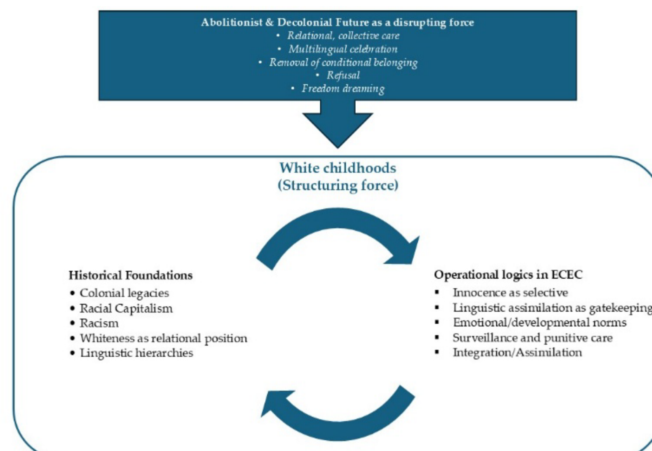
In this context, abolition is also a refusal to evaluate worth according to white childhoods. Instead of asking how migrant families can integrate better or how their children can "catch up" developmentally, this paper asks: What would an early childhood space look like if no one were required to prove their right to be there? (Puwar, 2004; Ramose, 1999). What possibilities emerge when care is not tied to legibility, gratitude, or assimilation?

Decolonial feminist thinkers such as Mohanty, Tronto, and Davis have long argued that justice is relational, emotional, and collective. In this view, care is not a vehicle of control but a site of possibility. Abolitionist methodologies require staying close to what is speculative, partial, and incomplete. Not as a means of evading evidence, but to pursue what participants said they wished existed. In so doing, white childhoods become not merely oppressive or exclusionary but also historically contingent and ultimately unnecessary. Freeing children from the impossible ideal of innocence tied to whiteness allows all children, and their families, to exist in their complexity.

The diagram below visualizes the white childhoods framework developed in this paper and the theoretical arguments used in its conceptualization. It shows how historical foundations and their continuation through the operational logics of ECEC reinforce a cycle. The historical foundations are built using colonial legacies, racial capitalism, whiteness as a relational position and linguistic hierarchies. The operationalization is evident through selective innocence, linguistic assimilation, emotional/developmental norms, and surveillance. These dimensions continually shape and reinforce each other, reproducing white childhoods as a dominant structuring force in ECEC. Surrounding and disrupting this cycle are abolitionist and decolonial futures and refusals. Where relational, collective care, multilingual celebration, removal of conditional belonging, and dreaming otherwise represent an ongoing, non-linear end stage that is not final but functions as an interruption and disturbance to white childhoods. While the diagram below is created to help the reader understand this framework, it does not encompass the full complexities of this framework.

Figure 1

White Childhoods framework



Method: Composite Voices and Speculative Refusal

Grounding the Method

This paper draws on 27 in-depth interviews conducted with Syrian mothers navigating motherhood and everyday life in the context of migration in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. Although the research focus was not explicitly on ECEC, all participating mothers were parenting young children who were enrolled in or approaching enrolment in formal ECEC settings. The mothers we spoke with had either recently arrived or had settled in Europe for fewer than five years, most holding refugee status or temporary protection. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and often unfolded through relational, repeated encounters rather than structured one-off sessions. In addition, ethnographic participatory observations were carried out in childcare centres, community organizations, language and integration classes, and informal family support spaces, complementing and contextualizing the interviews. Participants provided audio or written consent, with the option to withdraw if desired. Consent was reconfirmed at several points in the research process, and the names of the mothers used are all pseudonyms with names they have chosen for themselves.

The research design aimed to foreground everyday experiences of care, exclusion, and belonging (Bhattacharyya, 2017; Tronto, 1993). Rather than extracting a fixed "account" from each participant, we took an open, conversational approach grounded in relational ethics, allowing participants to shape the direction of our discussions (Abebe et al., 2022; Mohanty, 2005). What emerged was not just a dataset but a constellation of encounters shaped by trust, repetition, and emotional labour, particularly as one of the authors belongs to the Syrian community. Alongside these interviews, we observed parent–educator interactions, bureaucratic appointments, and school orientations, paying attention to moments of tension, silence, and misrecognition. These observations did not serve to "verify" participants' stories but to deepen understanding of how whiteness, racism, and state systems shape early childhood spaces through soft power, surveillance, and the logics of inclusion.

Methodologically, the analysis was developed through a layered approach spanning three axes: lived experience, thematic synthesis, and speculative projection (Love & Muhammad, 2020; Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017). We began by closely reading the interviews, identifying recurring concerns, such as marginalization of home languages, pressures around emotional legibility, maternal surveillance, and subtle forms of exclusion. From these recurrences, we derived core themes reflecting both the structural logics shaping participants' experiences and the intimate emotional registers in which these logics were felt (Burman, 2008; Connell, 2007).

A distinctive feature of this methodology is the inclusion of speculative interviews: short, imagined present and future conversations that do not represent literal predictions or fictional narratives but rather crystallize the affective and political desires participants expressed (Cullors, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012). For instance, when mothers described feeling shamed for speaking Arabic at home, their accounts often ended in a pause or a wish: "I wish they would just see that this is love." These pauses became entry points into speculative futures, brief visions of ECEC systems not structured by assimilation, surveillance, or linguistic punishment but by care, celebration, and collective responsibility (García & Wei, 2014; wa Thiong'o, 1986). To illustrate, in one speculative vignette, a Syrian mother arrives at where her child is cared for by community members to find Arabic books on the shelf, a caregiver greets her in Arabic, and other parents are sitting in a circle sharing a meal. In this imagined scene, the mother does not brace for racism or judgment; instead, she joins a circle where multiple languages and cultures flow together seamlessly, and that is the norm, not the exception.

Alongside these future-facing elements, we also draw on speculative vignettes from present-day conversations. Whether a mother is blamed for her child's "language delay" or a child refuses to speak the dominant language at school, these moments do more than illustrate harm: they reveal how white childhoods function in everyday life (Ahmed, 2012; Blommaert, 2010; Wekker, 2016). Taken together, present and speculative fragments enable a form of analysis that documents existing conditions while pushing towards new possibilities. These short vignettes do not propose a utopian future; they are political

provocations grounded in the realities of migrant families. Such methodological choices are both tactical and political (Davis, 2003; Stovall, 2018).

Composite Voice as Abolitionist and Decolonial Methodology

This methodology draws on scholarship in abolitionist research, southern theory, and decolonial feminist methods (Abebe et al., 2022; Connell, 2007; Love & Muhammad, 2020; Mohanty, 2005). Following Abebe's call to centre epistemologies of the South and Connell's (2007) work on Southern Theories, we reject extractive, individualized models of knowledge production in favour of methods rooted in relationality, refusal, and collective meaning-making (Mohanty, 2005; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Tuck & Yang, 2012). In this approach, the interview is not a moment of data capture but a shared encounter, often leaving room for incompleteness and contradiction (Federici, 2004). As Love (2019) reminds us, abolition is not merely about dismantling systems but also about imagining and practising otherwise (McLeod, 2018). The speculative interviews in this paper are one way of doing precisely that, listening for what participants sometimes dared not say openly but carried in their imaginations.

Finally, this approach is grounded in a refusal to treat participants' experiences as extractable, discrete units of meaning. Instead, we treat conversations as co-produced, situated, emotional, and partial forms of knowledge. Rather than distil participants into examples serving a theoretical claim, we aim to remain close to their emotional and political rhythms, hesitations, contradictions, and refusals. The speculative dimension is not a departure from the empirical but a continuation of it: a means of honouring what was said by imagining what might be possible. This layered, refusal-based methodology recognizes that racialized systems do not merely harm migrant families; they are also actively imagining otherwise. By foregrounding those imaginations, not as future fantasies but as emergent blueprints of collective care, this paper situates itself within abolitionist and decolonial frameworks that also shape the theoretical commitments outlined below.

Findings

Present-day Interviews: Thematic Vignettes

The following sections draw on speculative present-day interviews based on interviews and encounters with Syrian and other migrant mothers to illustrate how white childhoods operate in everyday interactions within European ECEC systems. Four thematic vignettes highlight how white childhoods shape language policies, emotional expectations, parental surveillance, and the regulation of belonging (Ahmed, 2012; Burman, 2008). Each section opens with a brief quote capturing a lived encounter, followed by an analysis of how that moment reveals the workings of whiteness, coloniality, and racial capitalism. These vignettes are not exhaustive but indicate recurring patterns of marginalization and refusal in spaces ostensibly dedicated to children's care.

Linguistic Erasure

> The centre does not help. They tell us to focus on speaking German with our child, but we want to keep speaking Arabic at home, too. We would like our child to learn German, of course, but why can our child not speak both? The people at the centre make us feel like speaking Arabic to our child will ruin his life! *(Sara).*

This mother's frustration encapsulates a common theme: the pressure to abandon home languages to demonstrate "integration." Although mothers described languages like Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkish as carrying love and family bonds, ECEC professionals often portrayed them as obstacles. Educators, integration officers, and health workers advised parents to speak only the dominant language at home, implying that home languages would confuse the child or lead to poor educational outcomes. The underlying message was that linguistic assimilation is more important than cultural continuity.

In Belgium, mothers recalled that routine health centre visits and language assessments frequently included a warning that speaking Arabic at home might "set the child back at school". In Germany, parents heard similar directives: Arabic was explicitly linked to lower achievement, whereas German was touted as the only route to success. These encounters demonstrate what Blommaert (2010) calls linguistic

gatekeeping, wherein social belonging depends on adopting the "correct" language early and exclusively. The framing of Arabic or Kurdish as "developmentally detrimental," despite strong research on the benefits of bilingualism, exemplifies how whiteness and racial capitalism shape which languages, and therefore which childhoods, are valued.

Some mothers noted that their children eventually became reluctant to speak Arabic, even at home, fearing stigma or misunderstanding at school. One mother said her son told her he "did not want to sound like me". Far from a simple shift in language, this reveals how institutional pressures encourage children to dissociate from their linguistic and cultural roots. Such erasure underscores the violence embedded in white childhoods: to be judged a "good child”, one must show linguistic fluency in ways that privilege whiteness. Consequently, families find that emotional warmth, cultural identity, and relational continuity are sacrificed.

Emotional Legibility

> She does not smile enough, a teacher reportedly told one mother in Germany. "Is she okay at home?" The mother recalled feeling unsure how to respond. She is just quiet, she said, but they made it sound like she was in danger (Layla).

Mothers we interviewed often recounted how their children's emotional expressions, or lack thereof, were pathologized. A child deemed "too shy" or "too withdrawn" was interpreted as signalling family dysfunction or inadequate parenting, leading to offers of parenting workshops or, in some cases, heightened scrutiny. While these institutional actors described their concerns as protective, their approach functioned more as emotional surveillance.

Such judgments reflect how emotional norms are racially coded. Drawing on Ahmed (2004), emotions are not merely individual or internal states but are shaped by social expectations about what a healthy child should look and feel like. In ECEC settings, those expectations are implicitly grounded in white, middle-class affective norms of extroversion, clear verbal engagement, and constant cheerfulness. Children who do not perform these norms face suspicion or referrals for "intervention."

The expectation that children perform emotional integration is not limited to the classroom; it also extends to parents. Mothers described being encouraged to "model confidence" or "show more warmth" in school settings, particularly during orientation meetings or parent–teacher consultations. Though framed as friendly advice, these suggestions were experienced as subtle demands to embody a form of emotional citizenship aligned with whiteness: upbeat, transparent, apologetic, and grateful. As El-Tayeb (2011) notes, inclusion in European spaces often requires both cultural assimilation and affective submission. Emotions thus become a site where belonging is simultaneously judged and enforced.

In this framework, emotional legibility is not merely about being understood; it is about conforming to dominant norms of intelligibility. These emotional norms do not simply reflect whiteness; they actively produce white childhoods as privileged, protected, and recognizable. Emotional expression becomes a key threshold by which racialized children are either admitted into, or excluded from, the realm of "proper" childhood. This is where coloniality, racial capitalism, and racialization converge: children are not simply misread, they are governed through affect, and their futures are managed accordingly. The child who does not smile, speak, or connect in the "expected" manner becomes a problem to be solved. In one example, a mother recounted that her son was described as "emotionally behind" for preferring to play alone. "He just wanted to play by himself sometimes," she explained, "but they told me he's not integrating well." Integration, then, is not solely about language or participation; it is also about feeling at ease, looking comfortable, and being emotionally available to the institution.

These moments of affective judgement reveal how deeply care is racialized. Racialized children are frequently framed as needing interventions that present themselves as protection. In practice, these interventions enforce emotional norms rooted in white, middle-class culture and racialized ideas of what a 'healthy' child should look like. The core issue is not merely whether children are happy or sad, shy or outgoing, but whether they are permitted to exist as full subjects without performing whiteness

emotionally. Such institutional demands create a narrow horizon of acceptable affect, obscuring how migration, displacement, language adaptation, and social mistrust shape a child's emotional expressions. Consequently, the classroom becomes a space in which a child's face, silence, or mood is incessantly read for meaning. That meaning is shaped by racialized assumptions regarding who belongs and who signals dysfunction.

Some mothers quietly resisted these interpretations. One explained that she stopped trying to justify her child's behaviour and instead told the teacher, “She is fine. This is who she is”. This refusal to translate the child into the dominant emotional code operates as a form of care. It safeguards the child from being misread while affirming the legitimacy of emotional expression that does not align with the white ideal. These refusals are not grand acts of resistance but small, everyday assertions of sovereignty.

In these encounters, emotional legibility becomes a site of racialized assimilation. To belong, children must not only learn a language, but they must also learn a feeling. When they do not, their bodies are flagged, their families are questioned, and their worlds are reshaped under institutional scrutiny. The cost of this legibility is high: to be recognized as a "proper" child, one must first be rendered emotionally knowable within white childhoods.

Motherhood and Surveillance

> They think we do not try hard enough. If the child does not speak well, the mother did not do enough (Maram).

This quote, shared by a Syrian mother in Belgium, encapsulates a recurring sentiment among many of the interviewed women. When children struggled with the dominant language, failed to meet behavioural expectations, or exhibited signs of emotional withdrawal, blame often reverted to the mother. In these situations, institutional discourse did not acknowledge children as subjects shaped by displacement, structural violence, or linguistic transition. Instead, it positioned mothers as both the origin of the problem and the key to its solution.

Across Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, mothers were told, either explicitly or indirectly, that their parenting practices were inadequate. Some were advised to speak more Dutch or German at home, despite still learning these languages themselves. Others were encouraged to "be more confident" or "show more warmth" in their interactions with teachers or integration officers. On several occasions, mothers described how home visits, integration workshops, or early childhood centres became sites of evaluation, with their tone, gestures, food choices, and children's vocabulary all under scrutiny. Although such assessments were often framed as supportive, they functioned as a form of discipline, reminding mothers that their access to care was contingent on institutional approval.

This type of surveillance extended beyond emotional or cultural expectations. One mother in Germany explained,

> They told me, 'You cannot stay home forever. If you want childcare, you need to find work.' But I am still learning the language. Who will hire me?

In several instances, access to subsidized childcare depended on employment status or participation in job-readiness programmes. Mothers spoke of feeling caught in a contradiction: they were expected to integrate into the labour market while simultaneously being judged for their parenting. Their presence in the public sphere was legitimized only through economic contribution.

This contradiction sits at the core of racial capitalism. As Bhattacharyya (2017) argues, migrant and racialized communities are included only through forms of incorporation that extract value, be it through labour, compliance, or affective alignment. In early childhood systems, care is not given freely but offered as a reward for productivity, legibility, and "proper" integration. As Kremer (2007) shows, European welfare systems frequently present care as a private responsibility, yet they closely police how that care is carried out, especially by racialized mothers. Tronto (1993) reminds us that care is never neutral; it is shaped by power, determining who is deemed deserving and under what conditions.

In these contexts, mothers are not recognized as caregivers in their own right. Instead, they are viewed as instruments for achieving integration. Their emotional labour, bilingualism, and home practices are construed either as barriers or as tools for ensuring the child's institutional success. This framing evokes what Oyěwùmí (1997) describes as the colonial construction of non-Western motherhood: not inherently valid, but something that must be reformed, corrected, or made useful. Within ECEC systems, racialized mothers are expected to enact care in culturally legible, economically productive ways. Those who do not, or cannot, are labelled non-compliant and undeserving. This is not simply cultural bias; it is a structural demand: integrate, contribute, and prove your worth, or lose access.

The state governs not only motherhood, but the very terms of belonging. Mothers are funnelled into workshops and government programmes that promise support but often deliver moral judgment. Some reported being asked to devise educational goals for their toddlers. Others were urged to prioritize "career planning" over community care or language learning at a self-directed pace. Such expectations rarely accounted for trauma, childcare availability, or immigration status. Instead, they cast integration as a choice, and any failure as the mother's personal shortcoming.

Nevertheless, many mothers did not fully comply with these pressures. One insisted on speaking Arabic at home despite repeated warnings.

> It is how we are together.

she said.

> She will learn German at school, but she needs to hear me in our language.

Another mother stopped attending parenting workshops after feeling judged.

> They did not want to help. They wanted to tell me how to raise my child like theirs.

These are not dramatic acts of resistance but rather deliberate ones, signifying a refusal to be made legible on institutional terms.

Such moments reveal that white childhoods are maintained not only through emotional legibility or linguistic assimilation but also by regulating those who mother racialized children. The state's gaze falls on the child's behaviour as well as the mother's presence, productivity, and demeanour. When care is proffered only to mothers who perform it in recognizable, economically valued ways, it ceases to be care; it becomes a contract.

White childhoods, as a framework, depend on these contracts. They are not merely developmental ideals; they function as state-managed, racially ordered systems of care and control. At their heart lies a persistent question directed at migrant mothers: Are you working hard enough to deserve support?

Childcare Refusal and Belonging

> “He is always shouting“, a teacher told one mother in the Netherlands. “He does not listen, does not sit still. He just does what he wants." The mother replied, "At home, he is calm. He does not like it there. They do not understand him*!* (*Kevser*).

This is one of many instances in which mothers described their children not as quiet or withdrawn but as active, loud, and defiant, refusing the behavioural expectations of the ECEC environment. Unlike earlier examples of silence or emotional hesitation, these forms of refusal were interpreted not as signs of trauma or adaptation but as disciplinary problems. Children were described as "too loud", "uncontrollable", "not ready for school", or "difficult to teach". In each case, these labels carried racialized and gendered connotations. The refusal to sit still, follow instructions, or remain quiet was viewed as both an educational and a parental failing.

In these encounters, children's energy, playfulness, or assertion of autonomy were not read as normal developmental expressions but as failures to comply with the behavioural norms of white childhoods. Rooted in colonial models of education and governance, these norms emphasize bodily control, self-regulation, and emotional transparency. As Burman (2008) argues, white developmental

frameworks idealize a particular kind of child: calm, legible, and oriented towards institutional success. Children who diverge from this ideal, expressive, loud, or willing to challenge authority, are marked not as diverse but as disruptive. This racialized reading of behaviour appears repeatedly in the data. One mother explained that her son was sent home multiple times for "*being too much*." "*He was not hurting anyone*", she said, "*just laughing, running, playing loudly. But they told me he was not ready*." In another case, a girl who resisted being touched by her teacher was referred for further evaluation. "*She does not like strangers touching her*", her mother said. "*That is normal for us*." Yet her bodily autonomy was interpreted as abnormal or oppositional, rather than being respected.

These interpretations reflect what Ahmed (2004) term "affective economies," in which certain emotions and behaviours are legible only within dominant racialized and gendered scripts. In early childhood education, such scripts define the "good child" as one who is responsive, controlled, emotionally open, and compliant. Refusal, therefore, becomes not just illegible but punishable. Moreover, for racialized children, punishment tends to come more swiftly and more severely. These forms of refusal, such as being loud, interrupting, rejecting touch or compliance, should not be interpreted as a lack of socialization. They are counter-performances shaped by mistrust, discomfort, or an early recognition that institutional approval is provisional. These children are not failing to adapt; they are choosing not to. This choice may not always be conscious or articulated, but it is relational. As Love (2019) suggests, it is a form of abolitionist refusal: not merely resisting authority, but refusing to be rendered palatable to systems that were never designed for them. White childhoods, as a structuring framework, depend not only on emotional legibility or language fluency but also on behavioural docility. Children are expected to be recognizable in their feelings, controllable in their bodies, and responsive to adult authority. When racialized children transgress these norms, whether intentionally or through embodied refusal, they expose the institution's aim to produce not just educated children but governable ones.

Mothers often bore the blame for these disruptions. Teachers asked what was "wrong at home," recommended parenting classes, or insinuated that the child's misbehaviour resulted from poor maternal guidance. Yet mothers themselves recognized the misreading. "*He is not bad*", one said. "*He just does not want to play by their rules. I don't blame him*." These maternal responses echo the critiques embedded in children's actions. Together, they enact a relational politics of refusal, a collective unwillingness to be moulded by a system that interprets non-conformity as pathology. As Oyěwùmí (1997) and Tronto (1993) remind us, care and discipline cannot be separated in systems formed under coloniality and racial capitalism. A child's loudness, refusal to cooperate, or reluctance to accept touch are not external to care; they represent care for the self, the body, and personal boundaries. These moments reveal the limits of inclusion: not all children desire to be included if "inclusion" amounts to erasure, surveillance, or behavioural correction. By refusing, they disrupt the coherence of the white childhoods imaginary. Even in early education, where children are assumed to be innocent, malleable, and open to care, the institution demands submission. When children withhold that submission, they become problems, and their families become "cases." But from this framework's perspective, refusal is not a problem to be solved; it is a pedagogy of self-protection and relational sovereignty.

Ultimately, these children are not failing to belong; they demonstrate what belonging looks like when it is not tied to correction. Their refusals do not reject education itself but challenge the terms on which education is offered.

Speculative Future: Abolitionist Imaginaries

Care without Surveillance

> There is no form to fill out anymore. I leave my child with people who know her name, not just her file. We take turns watching each other's kids. Nobody is testing anything; we just trust each other (*Hiba*)

This speculative fragment imagines an early childhood care system free from institutional surveillance. It emerges from what many mothers shared in interviews: the exhaustion of being monitored, evaluated, and blamed in spaces purported to support their children. In this vision, care is not regulated

by paperwork, performance, or productivity. It is held by the community rather than extracted by the state. During fieldwork, mothers repeatedly described feeling watched, assessed, and silently judged by educators, caseworkers, and welfare staff. Their parenting was never neutral; it was conditional, continually tied to proving that they were "doing enough" to receive care. They longed for more accessible services and freedom from the fear that support could be revoked at any time. The speculative voice above imagines what it might feel like if care were not contingent on economic contribution or emotional performance.

This future aligns with abolitionist theories of care as relational, collective, and non-institutional (Love, 2019; Tronto, 1993). It challenges the assumption that outsiders must verify care or justify it through labour market participation. Instead, it reclaims care as a mutual responsibility, one that is not monitored but co-created. Within the white childhoods framework, care has been weaponized to discipline racialized families. This vignette rejects that logic entirely. It asks: What becomes possible when no one is watching and nothing needs to be earned?

Multilingual Learning as Shared Life

> My daughter came home and taught me a new word I did not know in Arabic, German, or Kurdish. It is from another kid at the centre. They made it up together. The teachers just watched and smiled. No one stopped them to correct it! (Salam)

This imagined scene envisions a future in which language learning is neither ranked nor managed, but collectively experienced. In contrast to current ECEC practices that elevate dominant national languages as key to integration, this vignette portrays a multilingual environment where difference is not reduced to state-defined fluency. Instead, children learn through relationships, invention, translation, and play. The emphasis is not on correctness but on connection. Mothers interviewed expressed concern over the pressure their children faced to abandon their home languages to demonstrate "progress." Arabic and Kurdish were seen as obstacles, while German, Dutch, and French were treated as necessary benchmarks for success. Even multilingual children were corrected when using the "wrong" word in a given context. This speculative vision rejects the economy of correction, imagining a space where language is fluid, improvisational, and co-authored by children.

This future is grounded in abolitionist and decolonial critiques of linguistic hierarchy (Blommaert, 2010; El-Tayeb, 2011). It challenges white childhoods not merely as a racialized identity but also as a linguistic project that assigns value based on proximity to the dominant language. In this vision, no single language holds primacy. Children are not passive vessels to be filled but partners in meaning-making. It is not simply that their languages are permitted; they actively shape the very grammar of care.

Collective Mothering and Relational Care

> I do not do it alone anymore. Sometimes she stays with our neighbour when I am tired or working. Other times, I watch her friend. We do not explain anything to anyone; this is how we care here. It is not perfect, but it is ours. (*Yara*)

This speculative vignette proposes a world where the burden of individualized, closely monitored mothering has been refused. Instead of being expected to serve as the self-sacrificing, ever-integrating migrant mother, care is shared, without apology, justification, or institutional interference. The state does not ask where the child slept, who collected them, or whether they were "sufficiently stimulated" that day. The care is not standardized but relational, rotational, and sufficient in its own right.

During fieldwork, mothers spoke of feeling isolated, bearing sole responsibility for their children's well-being, and fearing that any slight deviation from conventional parenting norms could trigger intervention or blame. They longed for support, not from caseworkers or school officials, but from each other. Many described informal arrangements, such as friends watching children for an hour or sisters collecting them from school, but always accompanied by the caveat that these arrangements remained unspoken. This speculative moment removes that fear altogether.

This vision draws on abolitionist feminisms that challenge the state's monopoly on defining care and responsibility (hooks, 2000; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Tronto, 1993). It rebuffs the logic of racial capitalism, which

compels migrant mothers to perform endless unpaid reproductive labour while proving their integration through economic contribution. Under this framework, white childhoods depend on a tightly controlled nuclear family structure. The vignette defies such containment by reclaiming care as a shared, everyday act that is nobody's business but the community's.

Childcare Refusal and Decolonial Belonging

> He does not say thank you when they praise him anymore. He told me, 'I did not ask them to like me.' They say he is stubborn. I think he just knows who he is now (Khadija)

Here, we see a child who no longer performs politeness to meet institutional expectations. His refusal is not couched as adult-style resistance but appears as clarity: he recognizes that the recognition on offer is conditional, and he no longer wishes to earn it. He does not seek to belong, declaring instead that his belonging is not up for negotiation.

During fieldwork, teachers and administrators often found children's refusals unsettling. Children who avoided eye contact were flagged for emotional support; children who declined to take part in group activities were deemed uncooperative. However, mothers shared different interpretations. They saw fear, weariness, or mistrust, not dysfunction. One mother recounted:

> He watches everything. He does not talk, but he sees what they expect, and he does not give it.

> Such refusals may be punished, yet they remain highly intentional.

This speculative vision imagines what happens when that refusal is left intact, when a child does not need to become legible to be safe, valued, or free. It aligns with decolonial critiques of education that reject demands for racialized children to assimilate into systems built on their exclusion (Mohanty, 2005; Love, 2019; Wynter, 2003). White childhoods depend on emotional availability, gratefulness, and behavioural compliance. This child declines all three, and still belongs. Not because he has been included, but because the system that once required his compliance no longer determines the terms of his belonging.

Conclusion and Discussion

The preceding sections have traced how white childhoods operate across early education systems, not through overt violence but via subtle, recursive logics: language correction, emotional policing, maternal surveillance, and behavioural regulation. These are not isolated practices; rather, they comprise an infrastructure of racial governance in which belonging is tentative, care is scrutinized, and compliance is rewarded. White childhoods function not merely as an ideal but as a system, one that privileges developmental legibility, linguistic conformity, and institutional trust, while disciplining those who deviate from its standards. This system does not collapse under critique; it absorbs it. It extends a contingent welcome on its terms, requiring those who wish to participate to perform gratitude, transparency, and aspiration towards social mobility.

As this paper has shown, however, refusal exists within these systems. It emerges in small, everyday acts, such as children withholding speech, mothers continuing to speak their language at home, and parents disregarding state-sanctioned parenting scripts. These are not grand resistances; they are survival strategies, refusals to remain fully visible on someone else's terms. Abolition is not exclusively a vision of the future; it is already being practised in incremental, relational ways, under constant constraint. Such acts of refusal expose the inherent instability of white childhoods: the system relies on continual participation to maintain itself, and withdrawing that participation constitutes a form of undoing.

Across four empirical themes, this paper has examined how white childhoods shape European ECEC through overlapping logics. Linguistic erasure often takes the form of soft pressure to condense multilingual realities into a single, state-approved fluency (Blommaert, 2010; El-Tayeb, 2011). Emotional legibility is not merely requested but demanded, positioned as a hallmark of proper development, yet it is always filtered through a racialized lens (Ahmed, 2004; Bernstein, 2011). Maternal care is neither supported nor valued; it is monitored, assessed, and measured against white, middle-class norms (Ferguson, & Vogel, 2017; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Tronto, 1993). Moreover, when children refuse to comply, whether they are "too

loud", "too quiet" or simply not emotionally demonstrative, this refusal is rarely recognized as clarity; it is coded as deviance.

The same logic underpins all these moments: perform legibility or risk exclusion. Although Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands share common patterns of racialization and colonial governance, these logics manifest differently across their respective institutional contexts. For example, Germany's integration model closely ties childcare access to labour market participation, while the Dutch system stresses state-defined civility and moral conduct. These variations underscore that white childhoods are not a monolith but a flexible structure moulded by national histories of coloniality and welfare governance. Nevertheless, the speculative vignettes in this paper suggest another grammar of possibility: care without surveillance, language as a relational tool, mothering as collective rather than solitary, and refusal as a form of belonging. These are not utopian fantasies; they represent glimpses of practices already occurring at the margins. As Love (2019) argues, abolition is not a call for a distant ideal but for engagement with what already exists in fragments. It is not simply a goal but a method of noticing what families do when they are not observed.

This shift is crucial. In educational contexts, the dominant response to systemic harm frequently involves demands for greater inclusion, more diversity, or stronger policy reform. However, as Ahmed (2012) and El-Tayeb (2011) point out, inclusion is often a trap; it absorbs critique without altering the structure. It compels racialized families to adapt, to become more visible, more grateful, and more compliant, without redefining what constitutes a valid child, parent, or community. If white childhoods remain the standard, no amount of inclusion will ever suffice. Abolition does not provide an answer on how to reform the system; it invites us to stop asking that question. What if we stopped seeking belonging in institutions designed to distrust us? What if we refused to offer legibility as a precondition for care? What if we no longer asked how migrant families could better integrate, but instead asked what care might look like with no state at the centre?

This paper does not advocate for better integration or more inclusive policies. It emphasizes that such frameworks are already saturated with the logics of racial capitalism and coloniality. Rather than seeking reparation, the paper calls for refusal; instead of demanding access, it calls for exit. Not because these families have failed the system, but because they are already building something else.

Hence, this discussion closes not with a blueprint but with a question: What if the future of early childhood education and care is not something we must wait for, but something we already know how to create?

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