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"The dream of my life is to know where I was born," "it was like closing an open door," these are some of the expressions used by individuals who, after years of intense and persistent searching, finally succeeded in locating their families of origin[1]. These men and women are part of an activist collective fighting for the right to know one's origins in Argentina. Most of them were falsely registered at the civil registry, which means they lack the documentation and information necessary for their search. This turns many into true researchers of their own history, tireless and creative "searchers" who have developed diverse technical, emotional, and practical skills to gather information about their origins. From an ethnographic perspective, this article recovers the experiences of individuals who have found their birth families in order to analyze how kinship and identity ties are constructed, and how meanings surrounding family, motherhood, siblinghood, and abandonment are shaped in these cases. Although reunions may appear to signal the end of the search, these stories reveal dilemmas and uncertainties in which conflict is a recurring element. Thus, the encounter leads to a new search, a search for creative strategies to cope with the expectations, desires, and demands of everyone involved. Information about one's origins, beyond being constitutive of personal identity (Strathern 1999), becomes a *disruptive information* for adoptees, as it mobilizes, alters, and reconfigures relationships, positions, and emotions within both the family of origin and the adoptive family.

Search, reunion, origins, kinship, conflict

"El sueño de mi vida es saber dónde nací", "fue cerrar una puerta abierta", estas son algunas expresiones enunciadas por personas que, luego de años de intensa y perseverante búsqueda, lograron conocer a sus familias de origen. Estos hombres y mujeres forman parte de un colectivo de activistas que lucha por el derecho a conocer sus orígenes en Argentina. En su mayoría, fueron inscriptos falsamente en el registro civil, lo que implica ausencia de información y documentación para realizar sus búsquedas. Esta situación los convierte, a muchos de ellos, en verdaderos investigadores de su propia historia, "buscadores" incansables y creativos que han desarrollado diversos saberes técnicos y emocionales, y destrezas de todo tipo, para obtener información sobre sus orígenes.

Desde una perspectiva etnográfica, este texto recupera experiencias de personas que encontraron a sus familias de origen, con el objetivo de analizar cómo se construyen los lazos de parentesco e identidad y cómo se elaboran los sentidos sobre familia, maternidad, hermandad y abandono en estos casos. Si bien el encuentro pareciera significar la conclusión o el fin de la búsqueda, estas historias revelan dilemas e incertezas que resultan del encuentro donde el conflicto es un elemento recurrente. Así, el encuentro supone una nueva búsqueda de estrategias creativas para lidiar con las expectativas, deseos y demandas de todos los involucrados. Por ello, la información sobre los orígenes, además de ser una información constitutiva de la identidad personal (Strathern 1999), es un tipo de información disruptiva para las personas adoptadas, ya que moviliza, altera y reconfigura relaciones, posiciones y emociones, tanto con la familia de origen como con la familia de crianza.

Búsqueda, Encuentro, Orígenes, Parentesco, Conflicto.

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Introduction[1]

What happens when someone is finally able to uncover information about their birth and locate biological relatives who were previously unknown to them? This paper seeks to answer that question by analyzing the experiences of individuals who searched for their origins and, after an arduous and demanding process, succeeded in learning details about their births and meeting their biological families. It focuses on the stories of Analía and Julia[2], two women in their fifties whom I came to know through the research I have conducted since 2010 on activism and the search for origins (Gesteira 2016).

In Argentina, discussions about searches, reunions, and identity inevitably evoke the efforts led by the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo) to locate and restore the identities of their kidnapped grandchildren (Villalta 2012, Regueiro 2013, Murillo 2023). Thanks to their exemplary work, the *Abuelas* have exposed the crime of child appropriation and restored the identities of 140 grandchildren. However, it is estimated that around 500 children were taken, many of whom still do not know their true identities. Inspired and challenged by that struggle, other people in our local context also began systematically searching for their origins. These are people whose births took place before, during, and after the dictatorship and who, starting in the 2000s[3], began forming their own organizations to advocate for the right to know their biological origins. These activists demand that the State uphold their right to identity and carry out various awareness and visibility campaigns. Most of these individuals were not legally adopted; rather, they were falsely registered at the Civil Registry as biological children, leaving them without the necessary documentation and information to conduct their searches. Reunions remain relatively rare but have increased in recent years due in part to the availability of genetic ancestry tests[4]. This situation has turned many of them into true researchers of their own histories: tireless and creative "searchers" who have developed a wide range of technical and emotional knowledge and skills to uncover information about their origins (Gesteira 2016).

The reflections presented here are part of ongoing ethnographic research on the experiences of searchers who have managed to find their birth families. The aim is to understand the nature of these reunions and to analyze how kinship ties are constructed and how meanings of family, siblinghood, motherhood, identity, and abandonment are shaped in these contexts. The methodology is based on in-depth interviews with individuals who have found their origins, WhatsApp conversations, and observations from various events (workshops, meetings, etc.) held by searchers' organizations with whom I have been working since 2010. This paper specifically analyses the stories of two activist women: Analía from "Busco Madre Biológica La Pampa" and Julia from "Raíz Natal." The trusting relationships built during fieldwork with these women enabled me to conduct multiple in-depth interviews and informal conversations over time, resulting in a significant corpus of data that led me to select their cases for this study. However, while this paper

1 This paper was translated from its Spanish version and reviewed by Professor Soledad Torres Aguero of the Institute of Anthropological Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires.

2 To preserve anonymity, all names in this research are pseudonyms. All participants gave informed consent. The research adhered to ethical guidelines as established by the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) under Resolution D. 2857/2006.

3 The first organization was Quienes Somos (2002, Buenos Aires), followed by Raíz Natal (2003), Búsquedas Verdades Infinitas (2010), Encontrarnos (2015), Nuestra Primera Página (Rosario, 2014), Colectivo Mendoza por la Verdad (2014), Hermanas del Alma (Córdoba, 2014), Hermanados por la Búsqueda (Rosario, 2016), and Te estamos buscando Patagonia (2019). Currently, there are hundreds of online groups and independent activists.

4 Common genetic ancestry platforms used in Argentina include Family Tree and My Heritage.

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focuses on their stories, the reflections I present draw on the entirety of the ethnographic material gathered throughout my research.

This work seeks to contribute to a line of anthropological research that examines reunions between adopted individuals and their families of origin (Carsten 2000a, 2007, Fonseca 2010, Allebrandt 2015, Salvo Agoglia and Marre 2020, Finamori and Miranda da Silva 2019, Clemente 2022, Salvo Agoglia, Gesteira, and Clemente 2023). It also draws on insights from the "new kinship" studies that were key in critiquing biologically determinist views of kinship and in recognizing the centrality of affective practices in constituting family relationships and connections between individuals (Schneider 1984, Strathern 1999, 2012, Carsten 2000, 2014).

The article begins with the reconstruction of Julia and Analía's stories. Julia was legally adopted in 1972, while Analía was falsely registered as a biological daughter in 1976, that is, she was misregistered and/or appropriated. Both eventually managed to discover their origins. I then analyze emergent issues such as the role of the birth mother and siblings in these reunions, the effects of gaining origin-related information, which Strathern (1999) identifies as constitutive of personal identity, and the central, inescapable role of conflict in the process of uncovering one's origin story. Finally, in the concluding reflections, I argue that information about one's origins, beyond being constitutive of identity, is also *disruptive information* for adopted individuals because it mobilizes, alters, and reconfigures relationships, positions, and emotions within both birth and adoptive families. Furthermore, I propose that the reunion should be understood as the beginning of a *new search*: a search for creative strategies to manage the expectations, desires, and demands of everyone involved.

The search and the encounter: *"The dream of my life is to know where I was born"*

Relationships are born when knowledge is born, asserts Marilyn Strathern (1999). Information about one's origins cannot be ignored or dismissed; even when it appears incomplete or fragmented, it plays a central and influential role in the construction of identity (Strathern 1999). Thus, information about one's origins constitutes a form of *constitutive information* with immediate social effects and forms part of individuals' identities, redefining relationships and exerting consequences on people's lives. For those who search for their origins, uncertainty regarding the circumstances of their birth becomes a central issue in their lives, and they strive to obtain such information to fill the "void" and cope with the anguish and loneliness that arise from "not knowing" (Gesteira 2016).

Analía was born in 1976 and was registered as if she were the biological daughter of the woman who raised her.[5] According to what she was able to reconstruct over the years, her adoptive mother had suffered a series of painful losses. She had a pregnancy that ended with the baby's death during childbirth and lost five other pregnancies thereafter. In 1976, Analía "arrived." Her adop-

5 Analía's story is reconstructed from interviews conducted in her home in Glew, Buenos Aires Province, on February 13, 2020; a virtual interview on September 23, 2020; ongoing WhatsApp conversations; and document analysis from various websites.

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tive mother had been diagnosed with schizophrenia, and their relationship was extremely difficult. Analía recalls the moment she realized she was not her biological daughter:

> When I was seven, I confirmed that I wasn't her biological child… I think I had gotten dirty, and in a fit of rage, she picked me up by the neck and screamed, "Why didn't you die instead of my son, you filthy little black girl?"… That day, my mind opened, and I lost my childhood.

Although she had a nearly ideal relationship with her father, her childhood was marked by the violence and abuse from her mother, which intensified as she grew older until it became "unbearable." At fourteen, she decided to leave home. Since she was born in 1976, she contacted *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* with her suspicions, but genetic testing[6] came back negative. She looked at her birth certificate and saw that it was signed by a doctor in General Pico, La Pampa province, so she went there. In 2004, she made her first trip, despite severe financial hardship, because, as she put it, "The dream of my life is to know where I was born." In 2006, she filed a criminal complaint, and the doctor who had signed her birth certificate confessed to having delivered children illegally, though he made no specific mention of her case in court. From that moment on, Analía became a researcher of her own story, eventually founding an organization[7] and studying law until she graduated as an attorney. Through her tenacious and persistent efforts, she documented several cases of child abduction in La Pampa involving the same doctor who had signed her certificate. When these allegations became public and victims began appearing in the local media, the doctor committed suicide on August 13, 2017. Beyond that, the legal case went nowhere due to statutes of limitations.

In her investigation in General Pico, Analía encountered different versions of her story: that her mother was a young, poor girl who had been sexually abused and had to give her up. None of these versions led her closer to the truth. Her media presence in General Pico since 2004 eventually led her biological aunt, Coca, to recognize Aher and contact her:

> She called me and said: don't ask me anything, let me finish talking, because if I don't say it now, I'll never say it. I made a pact with my sister. We have a secret no one knows. You were born on September 14, 1976, after midnight at the Clínica Argentina. She didn't want to give you away. It's a very difficult story.

Lita, Analía's biological mother, was widowed and had two children. She met a man named Juan, who initially seemed "good and hardworking" but gradually isolated her from her family. Coca told Analía that she often saw her sister "disfigured from the beatings." Lita and Juan had a daughter, Sara, who was a year and three months older than Analía. The domestic violence escalated until Lita, with Coca's support and armed, forced Juan out of the house. Juan threatened to take

6 These genetic tests are performed at the National Genetic Data Bank to compare DNA with samples from families searching for children who may have been born during 1976–1983.

7 Busco Madre Biológica La Pampa. https://www.facebook.com/buscomadrelapampa/?locale=es_LA

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Sara with him, prompting Lita to cry to Coca, "Let him take her, he'll kill me and the kids. What can we do? He's the father; he'll come back forever. God help me."

Coca recalls this happening on August 25, 1976, and three days later, her sister revealed she was pregnant with Analía. She had gotten pregnant three months after Sara was born but had hidden it out of fear. Lita asked Coca for help – someone to support her and feed her children. Coca contacted the doctor at Clínica Argentina, who said, "I'll take care of everything, don't worry, we'll find a good family for the baby" while Lita insisted, "No, I don't want to give up my baby." Coca recounted this to Analía, sobbing: "I thought he was helping us; I believed he did the right thing. I swear on my life, we didn't take money, we didn't sell you."

Later, Analía took a private DNA test and in January 2020 confirmed that Lita was her biological mother, Coca her aunt, and Sara her full sister. To date, she has had only one in-person meeting with her birth mother, as she recounted:

> I stood at the door of her house… I had never felt such loneliness in my life… She opened the door and said, 'Come in, it's raining'. I didn't want to impose. 'Come in' she said… so I asked her if she could be the woman who gave birth to that baby. 'Yes, I'm your mother'. 'Why did you look for me then? You were raised well, you're a lawyer'. I told her I was looking for my biological truth, that I had always wanted to know my story, that I had nothing to judge, no resentment. I just wanted to know my identity. And then she said, 'I didn't want to give you up. They lied to me', I said, 'Yeah, I don't doubt those doctors…' 'But I didn't get paid' (…) And her hand started trembling, and I instinctively reached out and touched her for the first time. Her fingernails were identical to mine, same hand, same skin tone, and when I looked up, I realized I hadn't truly looked her in the eyes. It was electric. I looked at her and thought: this is me at 70. She calmed down and said, 'If someone had given me just a bag of pasta, I could have done it. But I don't want my other kids to know.' That's when everything started… she didn't want her other children to know, and that's a whole story…

Analía also described her encounters with her sister Sara and her father (only by phone so far):

> When we met, it was right at the gate of my house, and we hugged for ten minutes, crying. All the neighbors probably wondered what was going on *(laughs)*. I've rarely felt something like hugging someone and just falling apart, letting go of all your defenses, all your burdens. It was incredible. I felt an unmatched relief. And she too trembled, cried, pulled away, looked at my face, and hugged me again. It was wonderful. She stayed for two days, we talked non-stop. With Sara, it was an overwhelming emotion. Even though we're blood sisters, I had never seen her before. The things she told me pierced my soul… I saw her as a sister, a woman, even like a daughter. And despite everything, it all felt very natural.

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With her father, the encounter took on different nuances. Their contact has been by phone. In the first call, her father told her, "You can't be my daughter, what are you looking for?." To which Analía replied, "I just want you to know that you have another daughter. I wanted to hear your voice, nothing more. I'm looking for my identity." Since then, her father – whom she considers a compulsive liar – has called her daily and talks at length. "It's exhausting," she told me. He even tracked down her address and wanted to visit her, but Analía refused: "It was a total invasion." Through Sara, she learned about the various forms of violence her sister had endured. Moreover, her father wants Analía to take his last name:

> He wants to take it to court to give me his last name *(she raises her eyebrows and smiles).* Forget it. That's too much… No, no, I'm Linares. My children are Gómez Linares, my law degree says Analía Linares. Why subtract when you can add? And mind you, when the truth comes out, another story begins, here comes the mess, the claims, more people get involved, each with their own drama… My father is a mess. So far, I've counted eight children from different women, and I suspect he's been in prison.

The encounter with her birth family brings up a variety of emotions and expectations, yearnings, and sometimes requests. It's interesting to observe how these emotions and demands are managed when dealing with people who are technically "family" but are just getting to know each other. Regarding the "claims" made by her birth family, as Analía called them, she shared a revealing reflection:

> Well, see, this is where I'd love to have a specialized therapist, someone I could call and say, 'Sir, you have to understand…' you know? A mediator who could lower expectations and clarify: You cannot force her to give up her identity that only belongs to her. Understand that an identity was constructed for her, and she had to live with it. The last name thing is way too much… And now I've got an offended mother who doesn't know whether to open the door because she's upset, I looked into my father's side, and a father who wants to give me his surname. With my mother, I try to understand that she's a person whose pain has exploded in her head years and years of pain. What do I know? It's really hard to reconcile the truth in your head and your heart.

Analía's experience highlights the challenges and dilemmas faced by individuals in such situations. How much room should be given to the expectations, desires, and demands of parents who have just come into their lives? Her father, a man with a dubious past, pushes her to change her surname. Her mother pressures her to "choose" between her own version of events and that of Analía's father. Analía tries to respect their feelings and wishes, but also insists on her own pace to "reconcile the truth in her head and heart." What's clear is a collision of expectations between Analía, her mother, and her father, resulting in discomfort,

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anguish, and tension. Analía articulates a clear need for external support, like a mediator or therapist, to navigate these complexities.

"It was like closing a door; I dared to look for her"

Julia was born in 1972 and was legally adopted[8]. In 2007, at age 35, she found Olinda, her birth mother, who had married after giving Julia up for adoption and had four more children. Julia is a lawyer who worked on issues related to the rights of incarcerated individuals and is an activist in Raíz Natal, the organization she initially approached for help in finding the courage to search. Because hers was a legal adoption, she had access to a file that included information about her biological mother.

In one of the many conversations and interviews I've had with Julia since 2012, we discussed her reunion with her birth mother and the importance of the search in her life:

> For me, meeting her was about closing a chapter in my story, I dared to look for her, and that was it. But you don't find a mother figure, because when I think about that, the image of a mother is my adoptive mother. She's the one who passed down everything culturally. That can't be found in any other woman, especially not in one who's so different, who comes from a different social class and context. That's also a big deal. But that wasn't the case with my siblings. On the contrary. With my half-sister, I felt that excitement of meeting someone. I had the same feeling as when you're in love, waiting for a text message, 'What will she say?' (she smiles). That stage was very emotional. When I met my brother, I wanted to hug him, so to keep talking it was lovely. But with my birth mother… She seemed like a shadowy figure, not at all bright. She looked like a deeply depressed woman, weighed down by the past. It felt like she was carrying something she couldn't share – even with her own children. She hadn't resolved her past the way I have. I tell my story, I make it public. She doesn't. That's a burden when thinking about even the possibility of a relationship.

Two years before meeting her birth mother, Julia sent her a letter. Later, she learned from her siblings that her mother had attempted suicide upon receiving it. "I'm full of anger, I can't reach her. I don't feel guilty. If I believe this is my right, then I don't feel guilty. Or maybe I've just changed," she told me. The reunion with her biological mother was extremely difficult. They met in a suburban café, with another Raíz Natal activist waiting outside. Julia remembered:

> I wanted to go to her house, to see her surroundings, but she didn't want me to; she hadn't told anyone at home. And I felt really cold. A woman came up to the window and gestured to me. I felt like she had already recognized me. She started crying and talking nonstop, and I felt nothing… I think she

8 Julia's story is based on interviews conducted at her home in Buenos Aires on March 19 and 21, 2012; observations at Raíz Natal between 2010–2014; an interview on February 12, 2020; and regular WhatsApp conversations.

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> felt guilty… I had to comfort her, instead of her comforting me. It didn't feel right. And then her focus was on her other children that they study, that I could show up and be an example. I asked her to tell my siblings about me… She said she would, but when I called later, she hadn't told them yet. She said she needed to make arrangements. I felt like she kept pushing it off.

During that meeting, she didn't learn much about her father, only that when her mother told him she was pregnant, he said he was married and wouldn't take responsibility. Reflecting on the reunion and its impact on her identity, Julia said:

> When you meet them, you realize everything matters: biology, social life. When we talk about identity, it's not just biological identity. That's what we search for, but our identity is everything – culture, upbringing. And what weighs most is the upbringing, of course. We are who we are because of everything we've lived. The rest – biology – helps, it contributes, but it's just a piece. Still, I do think it's important to search, because otherwise you live in this fantasy, this unknown, this emptiness – and that does a lot of damage.

Julia affirms that the "image of a mother" she holds is that of her adoptive mother. Kinship, more than a matter of genetic certainty, is a network of shared meanings, accumulated memories, gestures, and stories activated over time (Carsten 2014)[9]. Precisely because of her role in Julia's life – through care and the transmission of values, through "culture and upbringing"– her adoptive mother holds that place. In this sense, memory is not merely a record of the past, but an active dimension of current ties and kinship (Carsten 2007).

Julia also reflected on the broader effects that her search had on her life:

> To be honest, what the search really helped me with was understanding my position in the world, you know? What changed for me was how I see myself in the world, in this personal journey: what do I want, what is it all for? That led me to join Raíz Natal. I believe that from the place of the story you've lived, you feel driven to create change to make sure what happened to you doesn't happen to others. That what you went through, which you know wasn't right, can be transformed for someone else.

In the Euro-American kinship model, information about one's origins creates both positive and negative relationships, it can lead to connection with new (biological) relatives or to rejection. But it always creates relationships. In the cases of Julia and Analía, origin-related information led to diverse relational outcomes: positive connections with siblings, but more complex or conflicted ones with their biological mothers, and in Analía's case, her father. Although Julia met her mother in 2007, in what was an uncomfortable and distressing encounter, she later tried to reconnect and saw her again in 2020. She remembered:

9 Temporality helps us understand how kinship is accumulated or dissolved over time. Analytically, it requires attending to experience, intuition, emotion, and memory, all imbued with specific resonances (Carsten 2014).

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> When she hugged me – she hugged me a few times, I thought: What do you even do now? Because I'm not the touchy-feely type. My friends say that about me. But she kept reaching for me… and I thought: what do you do in these moments? So, I just let go, let the feeling guide me. And in that moment, I thought, 'Wow, I want to feel a mother's hug.' I was looking for my mom, and everything got jumbled in my head. And I don't think you come out of this unscathed, it hits you hard. But still, it's something you need. For me, it was deeply healing. But with that healing comes a lot. It's like therapy, it hurts, but you know it'll make you better. Still, it's not easy.

For Analía and Julia, maintaining contact with their biological mothers proved difficult; with their siblings, however, some ties were more consistent while others remained sporadic. When a person discovers that she is not a biological child, that revelation is lived as a "before and after," a "shock" from which – as Analía put it- "the mind opens," a biographical rupture that alters the relationship between past, present, and future[10]. Likewise, the encounter with one's biological parents (mother and/or father) and siblings can be understood as a breaking point, in which the information about one's origins – embodied in people, events, and emotions – reconfigures the existing web of relationships and the idealized images one held of them. In this sense, if, as Strathern (1999) maintains, information about one's origins is constitutive, it may also be regarded as *disruptive information* insofar as it impacts, affects, and reshapes relationships with everyone involved in the encounter.

At the same time, stories like those of Analía and Julia reveal the tension between "blood" and "identity," since the process entails not only acknowledging a biological fact but also confronting all the affective and subjective issues – not without conflict- that emerge with such a "discovery." Thus, these narratives show, on the one hand, how blood – as a shared substance that binds us and as a metaphor for biological filiation- is also a socially invested marker of meaning (Carsten 2014, Caruso 2020); and, on the other hand, how identity involves a complex process of construction unfolding over a lifetime, among which the search for – and the encounter with- one's origins figures prominently.

10 Janet Carsten, in her study of the experiences of adults adopted in Scotland who have reunited with their birth relatives, notes that there is a difficulty in establishing temporal continuities in the experience of kinship that was dislocated in the past– namely, by adoption (Carsten 2000a). In adoptees' narratives, she argues, "there is an attempt to create a continuous self and also to take control of events that in the past were controlled by others" (2000a, 698).

Biological mothers: relinquishment, abandonment, and violence

In both stories, the mothers were in situations of extreme vulnerability during pregnancy and childbirth. In Lita's case – Analía's mother-gender-based violence was a constant and even the factor that determined the relinquishment, which was, in some way, intended to save Analía's life and that of her siblings. Olinda, Julia's mother, was working as a "cama adentro"[11] or live-in domestic employee when she met a man at a friend's birthday party. They ended up in a hotel room, even though "she didn't want to." A few months later, she discovered she was pregnant. The man denied responsibility, saying the baby wasn't his. Julia learned these details during their 2020 reunion. Olinda said that "thank God someone helped

11 "Cama adentro" is a common Argentine expression referring to live-in domestic workers.

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her," and after spending a week and a half with Julia, she handed her over, even though she didn't want to. "I had no choice. It broke my soul. You were my baby," Olinda told her.

In the adoption triangle, the birth mother is often seen as an unwelcome presence, someone who causes discomfort, whether she is a disgraced teenager or a woman with too many children to raise (Tarducci 2008). Either they are too young or have too many children,[12] placing them outside the boundaries of idealized motherhood (Tubert 1996). These women, deemed too young or incapable of raising a child, are pushed out of the moral model of motherhood (Nari 2004) and are instead seen as bad or "unnatural" mothers (Salvo Agoglia and San Román 2019), because they violate the so-called laws of nature (Palomar Verea 2004). Thus, the mother who had to give up her child – regardless of the reasons – carries the stigma of the "bad mother" and the suspicion of abandonment (Gesteira 2024). This helps explain why, in reunions, these women try to justify the separation and express deep shame and anguish over what happened, even when the separation was seen as a "good" for the child, literally saving their life, as Lita claimed, or giving them "a better future," as Olinda once told Julia. The anguish, guilt, and shame these women express can be better understood if we keep in mind that such separations – whether forced or chosen – clash with the modern ideal of motherhood, in which giving up a child is seen as *intolerable* (Fassin 2018). This becomes even more repugnant when money is involved. As Pierre Bourdieu (1998) reminds us, the family sphere is typically conceived in opposition to the market. That's why Coca, Analía's aunt, tearfully tells her, "I swear on my life, we didn't take money, we didn't sell you," making an effort to ensure Analía understands she wasn't treated as an object of exchange.

Cláudia Fonseca notes that in adoption, the birth mother is pushed aside and erased, because she represents the most powerful metaphor in the Euro-American kinship model, where biology is seen as the ultimate source of connection and blood as the symbol of relatedness and belonging (Schneider 1984). While most searchers look for their birth mother and say they won't judge her for the separation, the truth is that until the reunion happens, there's no way of knowing why the separation occurred. As Analía's case shows, even after the reunion, conflicting versions may circulate.

Because this is a difficult subject to address and comprehend, the idea of abandonment that haunts these individuals during their search is gradually reframed by the women's narratives of pregnancy, childbirth, and delivery stories, which, as I have found in my research, are often profoundly complex and painful (Gesteira 2024).

Fonseca argues that the word "abandonment" carries emotional connotations of rejection, as if relinquishing the child were a conscious decision made by the mother. Today, researchers highlight how women who consent to adoption are often themselves "abandoned" by their partners, parents, and society (2012:17). In Lita's case, she said: "If only someone had helped me with a bag of pasta," Coca viewed the relinquishment as "help" and a way to save her sister and her children.

12 Expression referencing the nuclear family model (Cosse 2010), composed of a monogamous heterosexual couple and a manageable number of children.

In this sense, it can also be understood as a contextual strategy for coping with poverty[13]. Olinda stated that "thank God someone helped her" when referring, euphemistically, to the process of arranging Julia's adoption. However, this help never involved supporting the mother while keeping the child, no jobs, money, or ongoing assistance. The "help" only involved facilitating the child's adoption and finding them a "good family," a better family one that could offer a better future than the mother herself could. These practices, arguments, and values, along with the accounts of Julia, Analía, Coca, Lita, and Olinda, invite us to rethink the meaning of giving up a child and to consider the many forms of abandonment present in these stories.

13 Several authors have studied the circulation of children and temporary relinquishments in charitable institutions as family strategies among working-class populations: Fonseca (1998) in Brazil, Leinaweaver (2008) in Peru, Milanich (2001) in Chile, and Villalta (2012) and Leo (2023) in Argentina.

Siblings

Another issue that emerged from these reunions is the high value placed on the sibling relationship and the intense emotions this bond provokes (Salvo Agoglia, Gesteira, and Clemente 2023).

The figure of the sibling stirs various emotions for both searchers and those being searched for (birth mothers, fathers, and siblings). Sometimes, the adoptee's existence is hidden from their biological siblings, who only learn from them at the time of the reunion. In both Analía's and Julia's cases, they demanded that their biological mothers tell their siblings about them. Both expressed that this situation led to discomfort, anger, and, in Julia's words, "rage." Thus, they are exposed to a double concealment: first, by their adoptive families who kept their non-biological status secret; and later, by their biological mothers, who refuse to reveal their existence to their other children.

However, once this revelation occurs, siblings often play a crucial role in shaping the experience of reunion. Siblings are perceived as equals, as peers. This is evident in the emotionally charged descriptions of the prolonged hug between Analía and Sara, and the "unique relief" Analía felt upon their encounter. Julia recounted similar emotions when meeting her siblings, the desire to hug them, to keep talking. She even described the excitement using the analogy of "being in love."

Martine Segalen (2013) notes that siblinghood is characterized by an ambivalent nature marked by both affinity and closeness (akin to friendship), and at the same time, by obligation. In the stories of origin, siblings are not held responsible for separation because they were too young or not yet born. There is no suspicion or blame, as Julia told me: "They aren't responsible for anything." Thus, siblings become counterparts in the encounter of peers. Once they learn of the circumstances surrounding their mother's separation from the sibling who has been found, they can take a position, but they had no influence over the decisions and circumstances that led to that situation.

From a psychological perspective, the sibling figure plays a key role in identification processes. The so-called "siblings complex"[14] takes on its significance in the process of constituting the self, narcissism, and identifications with the other

14 A combination of both hostile and affectionate feelings children experiences toward their siblings (Kancyper 2014).

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as an equal, and it plays a structuring and founding role (Kancyper 2014). From this perspective, the notion of the sibling as the other-self is particularly useful for analyzing these cases. When one uncovers the origin story and becomes aware of the existence of siblings, they can serve as a mirror for the life that might have been. In other words, the identification typically evoked by the sibling figure permits a counterfactual imagining of what life would have been like had one been raised by the birth mother. These images, while helpful in seeking the truth, can be difficult to process. As Analía said, "I know which school I should have attended, where I should have played."

Unlike filiation, which is a recognition of vertical descent, siblinghood operates horizontally (Segalen 2013). The terms "horizontal" or "lateral" are particularly apt to understand sibling dynamics in these reunions. These are positions that help reconfigure a new and expanded kinship structure. Analía described it this way:

> The encounter is about readjustment. I went from being an only child to having a sister from both my mother and father, to being the middle sister among my father's daughters (though honestly, it's hard to tell how many children he has), and the youngest among my mother's children. I mean, I was an only child – now I have to totally reconfigure my life… Even if everything goes well, you still have to reorganize so much.

In our Euro-American kinship model, where biological facts take precedence (Schneider 1984) and where the principle of exclusive filiation prevails, the coexistence of double filiation – both biological and social – is perceived as discordant. This is reflected in Analía's difficulty in "reaccommodating" these new figures of mother and father within a kinship structure where the sibling role often becomes a site of repair and possibility. As she put it:

> I think I've been preparing my whole life to find siblings (*she smiles).* I think I've always tried to figure out how to be a sister and to do it well. The equality with siblings, despite our different lives, makes you realize there are so many things carried in genes, in memory – I don't know where… The siblings made everything feel much more natural. With the parents, we might keep researching and trying to piece the story together, but deep down, it's not really reparable. We're not going back to being babies, and they're not going back to that age. But with the siblings, there's still a path ahead.

In this new kinship structure – one that must be reorganized and reassessed – figures are duplicated, as Analía noted, but so are the problems. These stories demonstrate the tensions, confusion, discomfort, and "quilombos" (messes), as Analía put it, that arise because different ways of processing and experiencing the reunion coexist. These individuals must manage their origin discoveries[15] as

15 As argued in other work (Gesteira 2020), the ties constructed by these individuals may be understood through the concept of relatedness (Carsten 2000), that is, as culturally constructed, dynamic, and flexible connections, where discovering biological origins introduces new challenges and dilemmas in the construction of identity.

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new and creative family arrangements (Andrade Rinaldi, Cruz Rifiotis, and Marre 2024).

In the stories of Analía and Julia, we see a *collision of expectations,* what each person hopes for from the other, and vice versa: between daughters and mothers, between Analía and her father. This is how new people are incorporated into kinship structures, overlapping roles emerge, and complications, challenges, and conflicts of varying intensity arise.

Kinship, identity, and conflict

The search for one's origins consumes the searchers, costing them years of their lives, causing anguish, and even physical symptoms. Consequently, reunions carry enormous expectations. As Analía said, they are imagined as the "end of the road," the "fulfilment of a dream." However, what I observed in the cases I studied in depth – and in many others encountered during my research – is that reunions, far from fulfilling a romantic notion of "finding the mother" (or, as Analía put it, "finding the embrace, the recovery of lost time"), are often deeply complex and fraught with conflict.

In addition to the tensions and disputes generated by competing narratives of the birth –especially evident in Analía's story –, there are the everyday challenges and problems of any family. In these scenarios, the searcher arrives and is sometimes expected to take a stance or "choose sides." Analía, for instance, was expected to choose between the maternal and paternal versions of events. This reveals how identity can become a contested space emotionally, symbolically, and even legally.

Despite warnings from both state agents and searchers themselves that reunions may not go as expected, they are still surrounded by a certain romanticization or imperative of success[16]. Analía put it bluntly: "I showed up like an unwanted guest – it's a really complicated story, and we all discovered the truth... you have to be prepared for things not to turn out the way you imagined; it could be a ticking time bomb."

Conflict is inherent in social relationships, not an accident, but rather a mode of socialization without which societies could not survive (Simmel 2013). Nonetheless, there is a tendency to eliminate or resolve conflict. In anthropology, conflict has often been subordinated to the presumption of order, something that, despite or through conflict, is instituted, renewed, or reproduced (Marques 2007). These stories show us that identity, kinship, and family are deeply subjective experiences where conflict is ever-present and, in fact, becomes most visible during the reunion.

In Analía's case, the conflicts are evident: the differing versions of events offered by her mother and father; the tension between her sister and their mother; the expectations placed on her by her father – such as changing her surname –, and the conflict between the father's version and the mother's. As she herself observes, once the truth comes out, "quilombo" (messes) ensues. Julia and Analía's

16 Several scholars have used the "movie reunion" metaphor to discuss the risks and difficulties of such encounters, noting the need to "deconstruct the typical plot found in movies, novels, stories, and even television shows" (Ledesma del Busto, Pedro Viejo, and Vila Torres 2012, 157).

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mothers also refused to tell their other children about them, which they both experienced as deeply distressing. Julia's mother even hoped that as a professional woman she would be a positive influence on her other daughter. Julia was also faced with a complex request from one of her siblings, who asked her to represent him in a legal case against their younger sister, who had accused him of violence. "I froze," Julia told me in 2020, "Can you imagine? Being a lawyer for one sibling against another? Madness. Of course, I said no." These conflicts highlight the *collision of expectations* that follow reunions.

Kinship is not an immutable element defined by biology, but a social field open to transformation and reinterpretation (Martínez 2010). These encounters invite us to reconsider the concept of family and affirm its dynamic, flexible, and conflictive nature, one that stands in contrast to the model family ideal based on romantic love[17], which is reinforced by literature, cinema, and television.

Perhaps it is precisely the power of this model family ideal – rooted in notions of maternal and fraternal love – that also shapes expectations around reunions, leading to their idealization and romanticization. Yet, these expectations often clash with the lived reality of uncomfortable, tense, and distant relationships. This suggests that recognizing conflict as intrinsic to personal and family relationships, and to identity construction – not as a disruption – might make reunions less painful and more manageable for both searchers and their birth families.

These reunions reveal the deep subjective need these individuals must understand and construct their own genealogies as a vital part of their identities. More than seeking "relatives," they are trying to compose a *narrative of the self* (Bruner 2004) one that is transformed and updated through the reunion and that aims to establish temporal continuities between present, past, and future (Carsten 2000). Thus, "finding" means integrating into that narrative previously absent, silenced, or conflictive elements to compose a more complex, and sometimes ambiguous or contradictory, version of one's life story.

Finally, through conversations with searchers in my research, another important figure has emerged: that of the professional mediator or counsellor specialized in supporting the search and reunion process. In Argentina, mediation is regulated as part of alternative conflict resolution methods (Matta and Godoy 2016), and although there are mediation and conciliation mechanisms in family disputes, a specific figure of the mediator for origin searches is not currently identified. In the United States, family mediators have played a key role since the 1990s in supporting adoptees from the 1960s. In Spain, the field is still emerging, and mediation in adoption is seen as a necessary development given the large number of internationally adopted children. Spanish mediators specializing in origin searches[18] note that "family mediation in these cases is crucial due to the sensitive nature of the search process and the need for professional support throughout" (Ledesma del Busto, Pedro Viejo, and Vila Torres 2012, 101).

Although none of the reunions analyzed here took place in a legal context, the presence of a mediator – as Analía suggested in relation to her father- could potentially offer tools to navigate these complex processes with less hardship and suffering.

17 A Western ideal that, in part, has supported the continuity and legitimization of the patriarchal system.

18 Jaime Ledesma del Busto is an educational psychologist and postgraduate in family mediation based in Madrid. He specializes in origin-search mediation and is affiliated with La VOZ de los Adoptados and AMM (Asociación Madrileña de Mediadores).

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Final reflections

The ideas outlined here stem from my current fieldwork, which seeks to examine reunions with birth families from an anthropological perspective, asking how these events are experienced, perceived, and narrated by the searchers, and how they shape their understandings of kinship, family, and identity.

The stories of Analía and Julia reveal not only the characteristics of the reunion experience but also the tenacity, willpower, and tremendous efforts these individuals undertake to obtain the information that, as Strathern (1999) argues, *constitutes* personal identity. Their accounts also support the argument that the reunion with the birth family involves *disruptive information*, one that reconfigures relationships and exposes individuals to a multitude of expectations, desires, and demands. This is because kinship ties, despite appearing otherwise, are not predictable or fixed; they are dynamic and full of surprises, as Strathern (2012) notes.

An ethnographic analysis of the stories of adopted individuals who reunite with their families of origin reveals that these are processes full of uncertainty and conflict, posing diverse dilemmas for those involved. The reunion, rather than marking the end of the search, signifies a *new search* for creative strategies to manage the expectations of all parties and address the challenges that emerge.

In both the search and the reunion, the power of the idealized family and the romanticization of the family scene permeate the desires and expectations of those at the heart of these stories. However, these reunions often demonstrate that such expectations are unlikely to align with realities marked by discomfort, tension, dilemmas, and emotional distance. This demonstrates that conflict – as an inherent component in the construction of social relationships – can be a valuable lens for rethinking the processes of search and reunion.

In this paper, I aimed to identify and reflect on the role of birth mothers and to rethink the notion of "relinquishment," as well as the persistent suspicion of abandonment, while also incorporating an analysis of the multiple ways in which women can themselves be abandoned in situations of extreme vulnerability and violence, as was the case for Analía's and Julia's mothers. These encounters offer new insights into the separations of women and their babies, which, in most cases, took place in contexts of profound isolation and suffering feelings that endured over time.

Another significant element of these reunions is the figure of the sibling, the emotional bond, the feelings akin to romantic infatuation, and the difficulties, tensions, and confusions that arise from the encounter.

Reunions bring together people who were once strangers. For searchers, they often represent years of anticipation and tireless effort. These encounters with birth families are disruptive events, accompanied by intense emotional mobilizations. Accompanying Analía and Julia in these processes allowed me to witness the distances – temporal, cultural, economic, and affective – that separate them from their birth families. Gaining a deeper understanding of these complex and powerful experiences can help us imagine support structures, policies, and resources that make these distances – impossible to eliminate – more bearable and inhabitable.

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Author's contribution

This article is entirely my own work, having participated directly in the process of conceptualization, methodology design, research, and writing of the original version.

Statement on the availability of information supporting the analysis

I declare that the content underlying the text comes mainly from interviews and ethnographic observations that are not available in any repository.

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