



# True Selves, Suspicious Lives. Public Deceits, Hopes of Restoration, and Existential Troubles in Misdocumented Pasts

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TRUE SELVES, SUSPICIOUS LIVES.  
PUBLIC DECEITS, HOPES OF RESTORATION, AND EXISTENTIAL TROUBLES IN  
MISDOCUMENTED PASTS

### **Abstract**

How do individuals, after having discovered they were lied to about the conditions of their births and their childhoods, seek out their own identities and re/establish the “truths” about themselves? Based on two ethnographic studies conducted in sites where lives and kinships were disrupted by political violence, this article aims to examine the urge for narrative coherence in contexts defined by public deceit and betrayal. In Argentina, Paul Macalli lived with the *nietos* who, decades after the dictatorship, discovered they had been stolen and educated by those responsible for their parents’ death. In Ethiopia, Sébastien Roux met with adopted children who were searching for their life “of before”. In these two contexts, the interviewees explained how their lives had been shattered when they discovered the lies they had been told. Their testimony equally revealed how they felt an existential and urgent need to re-establish the “truth”. Drawing on their experiences and their feelings, this article examines the link between two truths, truth regarding the past and truth about oneself, and explores the need to be certain of facts in the making of identities.

### **Keywords**

Subjectivity; Identification; Kinship; Institutions; Selfhood

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July 2017. The *Avenida Corrientes* leading to the obelisk monument is teeming with people. After waiting for over an hour, I am at last settled into a vermillion seat that recalls the Argentinian “Belle Époque.” I am there to see a performance at the *Teatro por la identidad* [Theater for Identity], which is both a place and, since 2000, an artistic movement related to the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. These Grandmothers [*abuelas*] are national heroines in Argentina. They have been relentlessly searching for their grandchildren [*nietos*] who disappeared during the dictatorship, having been “appropriated” by sterile couples who raised these children amid a web of lies. Nine persons appear on stage, one after another. Each one presents a monologue that addresses a particular life with humor and melancholy. Each of the actors finishes his or her performance by saying: “My name is X and I can state this because I know who I am.” This sentence – repeated, emphasized and expected – resounds with emotion in the quiet theater. At the end of the play the Grandmothers go on stage, accompanied by some of the 132 *nietos* identified to date<sup>1</sup>. The president of the association, Estela de Carlotto, thanks all those who have worked with her to re-establish “truth and justice.” In response, the public loudly chants in unison a familiar slogan from the massive human rights marches that have gathered hundreds of thousands of people over the past years: “*Madres de la Plaza, el pueblo las abraza*” [Mothers of the Plaza, the people embrace you].

[Paul Macalli]

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<sup>1</sup> As of January 2023, according to the official website of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (<http://abuelas.org.ar>)

December 2017. Zoé<sup>2</sup> arranges to meet in a café in Paris so that she can update me on her story. Adopted at the age of 7 in Ethiopia by a French couple, she had vague memories of her “birth family,” whom, as a teenager, she later decided to try and locate. Zoé first went back to Addis Ababa in 2013, but the orphanage that had taken her in confirmed the official version of her adoption story: that she had been found abandoned on the banks of a river. Zoé was considering abandoning her search, when a stranger she met near the orphanage offered to investigate the matter – in exchange for financial retribution. She accepted. Months went by; a family eventually came forward. Zoé returned to Ethiopia a second time, where she met a father, a mother and sisters – all of whom were happy to be “reunited” with her. But her stay with her new family did not go well; encountering insistent demands for money and support, Zoé decided to leave, thinking she would never return. Three years later, she received an e-mail from a man who claimed to be the person who found her when she was abandoned. He told her he had “information to give her in person.” After several exchanges, Zoé decided to go back to Ethiopia to meet him. After several hours together, he asked her: “Don’t you think you look like me?” He then told her that her “Ethiopian family” – the one she had met on her previous visit – was not her actual family, and that he was her real father. Zoé cries. She is busy preparing her fourth trip. This time, she wants “to do the DNA test.” She wants “to be sure,” she needs “proof” to “understand what really happened” in order to “know her true story”.

[Sébastien Roux]

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<sup>2</sup> All potentially identifying elements (people’s names, places, etc.) have been changed to protect the anonymity of those studied.

In Argentina, Paul Macalli conducted an ethnographic study on violence and post-dictature trauma (Robben 2005), focusing on the experience of the *nietos* – children whose parents had disappeared. As the *nietos* discovered, their birth parents were assassinated during the Argentinian dictatorship (1976-1983), and their executioners subsequently handed the children over to executive members of the military regime, who raised them. Within a few years, these children became the political incarnation of the suffering engendered by authoritarianism, and their quests a symbol of social justice (Arditti, 1999; Gandsman, 2009). In Ethiopia, Sébastien Roux met adopted children who were told that they were orphans, or that they had been abandoned, and that there were no other family members or attachments in their country of birth. Riddled with doubt, certain of these adoptees try to retrace their past once they reach adulthood. Often confronted with contradictory stories and incoherent pasts, they painfully endeavor to reconstitute and assemble the chaotic stages of their personal histories (Kim 2010; Yngvesson 2013).

This essay aims at making sense of similar “anxieties” (Stoler 2006) that we found at these two different ethnographic sites<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, in singular contexts, but almost simultaneously, we encountered corresponding issues. In Argentina and in Ethiopia, we were met with strongly-expressed doubts and suspicions regarding official versions of family composition – doubts which undermined beliefs and notions that affected individuals had of themselves, while also raising questions about the framing of contemporary identities. We encountered individuals, thousands of miles apart, who told us that they were not living the lives they thought they should be living, and who were seeking to “correct” their existences and identities. In spite of ambiguities in the official books, falsification, suspected corruption, systemic lies and occasional resistance, as well as the culpability of their States and their

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<sup>3</sup> For a similar approach where two ethnographic sites are echoed without following a strictly comparative methodology, see Crowley-Matoka and Hamdy (2016).

families, these individuals were trying to re-establish their “true” selves by collecting traces, clues and evidence of a past that persistently evaded them. They needed to shed light on their history so that they could mend; to be aware of the past in order to exist in the present. To such individuals, knowing their own life stories once and for all had become a condition for existence.

In Argentina, the organization of child abduction was the direct result (and product) of political violence at the heart of the military dictatorship (1976-1983) (Villalta 2009). In Ethiopia, the falsification of civil statuses was a direct consequence of extensive administrative and judicial disorganization and corruption in the 1990s, following the fall of the Derg (1974-1987). In both situations, individuals – for whom family represented the locus of public and political violence – were met with deceptions and falsifications from public apparatuses, which themselves were partly the result of bureaucratic malfunctions fostered by troubled political contexts. Thus, working with *nietos* and adoptees led us to interrogate the weight of institutions in the making of identities – on the basis of their failures. Through these individuals’ life stories, searches, and struggles, we reveal the entanglement of personal identity with administrative identification and political violence. On these two sites, we examine the way in which legalities are integrated into our definition of selfhood; we address the weight and power of identificatory institutions in the making of contemporary subjectivities; and we question the difficulty, or even the possibility, of living “outside of” bureaucratic and legal certainties.

### **When in doubt**

Our investigations led us to first question individuals’ places in the family, their certainties as to the “reality” of those places, and drawing from these beliefs, their feelings

about themselves. Indeed, the way in which such individuals perceive themselves – as both a person and a subject – is the combined result of an intimate position granted within the family and of a public and recorded administrative position within the society. In other words, one first gives meaning to “ego” – “I” – from that which those closest to themselves say about them, their relationship with those acquaintances and their recognition of their kinship. Yet this position is definitive only when it is supplemented with official documents to which bureaucracy confers an intangible status of truth, authenticity, and veracity, as long as one considers this bureaucratic institution sufficiently legitimate to make these artifacts indisputable. Thus, in contemporary societies marked with a “*morale d’état civil*” [civil status morality] (Foucault, 1972) one is never only what their kin pretend they are; they are also – as subjects and subjectively – those whom a government authority asserts they are. What they believe to be true about themselves is therefore the product of a double identifying discourse, partly hierarchized: that of their kin that places them in a domestic and private sphere, and that of an established bureaucracy – most often the State – that validates this position by identifying them as subjects of a public and political space.

As Yael Navaro-Yashin stated, “papers, especially written and official documentation, bear the symbolism of permanence in west European contexts. Printed, hand-written, and/or signed documentation carries the image of proof, stability, and durability. In most legal transactions within the Euro-American paradigm, documents which include writing in them are taken as references for truth or authenticity” (2007: 84). Such is also the case when it comes to family ties (Kim 2019), especially when relatives’ narratives about past and history may not suffice to determine relations and positions. This type of situation appears more and more frequently, according to Michael Herzfeld, as family ties have now become uncertain, as opposed to static and determined (2007: 320). Causes are numerous: the diversification of family arrangements (Bernstein and Reimann 2001; Lewin 1993); increased recourse to new

technologies of reproduction (Franklin 2013; Inhorn and Birenbaum-Carmeli 2008; Thompson 2005); spread of knowledge and increased use of genetic tools to enunciate kinship and belongings (Gourarier 2021; Reardon and TallBear 2012); etc. Yet, in this context characterized by increasing doubt, what happens when “official identification” also fails? If, following Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Bibler Coutin, we consider “the potentially powerful role of law and paper in figuring belonging and being” (2006, p. 184), how do individuals cope with complex situations when “law and paper” are dubious, elliptical, and even sometimes wrong or criminally falsified?

Various critical works, drawing on Michel Foucault’s concept of biopolitics (2009; 2010), have shown how modern States are characterized by their capacity to identify their subjects. To count the members of a population, to register them, to take a census of them, to study them... so many actions that reflect a governmentality where control, surveillance, or reform are the core tasks “at the heart of the State” (Fassin *et al.* 2015). Social sciences have mainly focused on unveiling the coercive dimension of this biopolitical project (Inda 2005). But they have grasped less the way in which this power of identification and registration has become a contemporary condition for “truly” knowing oneself.<sup>4</sup> If public identification is a technology of control, it may also correspond to a need (even a desire) for subjects seeking to be identified. Indeed, as a counterpart to this banal, daily and omnipresent power, people expect the subjugating system to collect, record and produce “truthful” information. The State – or more precisely its administration – is legitimate in identifying its citizens only if the identification is considered as corresponding with the person’s authentic “reality”. If the State has a performative power in declaring identities – *via* procedures regarding civil status – it also has the responsibility of assigning the truth to such identities and of producing an

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<sup>4</sup> This process of self-knowledge has been shown to be a concern inherited from the Christian injunction to introspection and self-examination (Foucault 2021; Keane, 2015).



authentic discourse in regards to its people. This ethical requirement has been rarely perceived by those critical sciences that more often have shown the force behind power. Yet, the administration is responsible and accountable due to the power it exercises. This contribution therefore aims at thinking about the distress and turmoil that arise when public identifications prove to be fragile, incomplete or falsified – and to make sense of the individual tragedies faced by those who, confronted with political violence and public deceptions, have not benefited from the power of identification to know themselves “truly”.

## **Fieldwork**

When our interrogations started taking form, we were both involved in a pedagogical relationship. Paul Macalli was finishing his Master’s research on the “Disappeared” in Argentina under the supervision of Sébastien Roux, who was conducting a study on international adoption. This relationship proved to be particularly heuristic due to the frequency and substantiality of their exchanges and conversations (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007). Surely, our situations were unequal, as were the levels of experience. Nevertheless, trying to stay aware of our differences – and the associated power relations – we tried to find meaning in the similarities existing between our Ethiopian and Argentinian studies, wherein both of us were confronted with deep-rooted, individual quests regarding the truth about a person’s self and access to one’s past. Paul Macalli went to Argentina in 2017 for five months to make observations and undertake interviews regarding the political treatment of the children of the Disappeared between 1976 and 1983 (Macalli, 2018). As for Sébastien Roux, he focused his reflections on family archives and intimate traces in a long-term project on international adoption conducted between 2014 and 2020 (Roux, 2022). Thus, our work is not the result of a systematic comparison. Rather, it is more the product of an analytical

assemblage, based on accounts collected in two situations marked by specific political violence where lives have been disrupted by bureaucratic falsifications. Therefore, we have not so much tried to bring out convergences or divergences in the “coincidental” (Boellstorff, 2007) falsification of identities, but rather to question the way in which these past criminal actions unsettle the ideas that some subjects have of themselves today.

### **Falsification as a Public Betrayal in Argentina**

On March 24, 1976, the Argentine president Isabel Peron was deposed in a coup d'état. A military junta headed by Jorge Rafael Videla, Emilio Eduardo Massera and Orlando Ramón Agosti replaced her. As soon as they arrived to power, the military junta implemented *El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* [National Reorganization Process] – a dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983. Congress was dissolved, political activities banned, censorship generalized, and unions and universities placed under strict government control. Putschists targeted so-called “subversives” accused of defiling the “Argentinian way of life” (Pion-Berlin 1989: 4). Until the democratic election of president Raúl Ricardo Alfonsín in 1983, Argentinians lived a period of state terrorism known as The Dirty War [*la Guerra sucia*]. Units of men in civilian clothes abducted targets from their homes, workplaces, or the streets. Their victims were beaten, hooded, and placed in unmarked vehicles; then taken to one of the 300 clandestine centers where such individuals were tortured (see CONADEP 1984). There, victims were either executed, cremated, and buried in anonymous graves; or they were sedated with barbiturates and thrown alive from aircraft into the Río de La Plata or into the sea. The total number of victims has long been debated (Brysk 1994); according to human rights organizations 30,000 disappeared (Gandsman 2012).

During these operations, infants and young children were abducted along with their parents. Among the victims were pregnant women who gave birth while in captivity and whose babies were confiscated by their persecutors. Newborns and young children were either given to military families (who falsified civil records to claim them as their own biological children, disconnecting the children's administrative identities from the one assigned by their biological families [Vaisman 2014]), sold to other families, or left anonymously in orphanages<sup>5</sup>. In Argentina, the number of children born in captivity is estimated to be around 500; to date, 132 of them have been identified – mostly using modern DNA techniques that link these children (now adults) to the genetic profiles of the families who disappeared (Smith 2016; Vaisman 2012; Regueiro 2010), profiles which have been recorded in the Buenos Aires Genetic Databank since 1987.

In 1977, mothers who sought their children began to gather in silent protest. They assembled in the Plaza de Mayo, wearing white scarves and marching with photographs of their children. These mothers were called *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*; they became the most visible manifestation of protest during the dictatorship in Argentina. Among them, a small group of women were also looking for their grandchildren: *las Abuelas* [the Grandmothers], looking for their *nietos* [grandchildren]. Their organization is still active today. Nowadays, the kidnapped children who have been identified are called *nietos*, symbolically placing them in their “real” lineage, that of their Grandmothers who pace up and down the Plaza de Mayo. When speaking about themselves, *nietos* often claim to have been “appropriated,” emphasizing the fact that they feel dispossessed.

Paul met Mercedes, a *nieta*. Thirty-eight years old, Mercedes is the daughter of an assassinated poet and his disappeared wife, who was illegally adopted by her mother's

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<sup>5</sup> These appropriations of children are also the result of an older practice among Argentine magistrates who, in the 1960s and 1970s, may have entrusted “abandoned” or “in need” children to other officials or related networks (Villalta, 2009). While the dictatorship systematized state violence, some of these forms – such as identity substitution – are part of older institutional practices.

cousins. She explains her life “has been a series of lies [...] I feel like I’m an object. Something that was moved every time someone felt like it”. Asked who this “someone is”, she replies: “The State. The State authorized my mother’s cousins to illegally adopt me, to take me and hide the truth about my biological parents.”

As Mercedes explains, in most of the situations observed by Paul, it is often the State, rather than the individuals, who are perceived as culpable of the crime of appropriation. For most of the *nietos*, to the extent that their adoptive parents are guilty of lies and dissimulation, they were only acting within the dictatorial system that made appropriation possible. And *nietos* do feel intimately, in their private bonds, the force of public violence, often struggling to unravel the tangled ties of the public and the domestic.

The process of disclosure that *nietos* experience is never linear. It may collide with the complexities of ambiguous affects, and at times remains unfulfilled. According to her birth certificate, Laura was born on December 8, 1974, but eventually she was led to have doubt about her origins:

“When I was 17, a friend of mine told me that his father had said that I was adopted in Mendoza. He remembered very well the day my parents returned to Buenos Aires with a newborn baby. I had my doubts, even though everything was not clear in my head. When I was 20 years old, I went to see the Abuelas for the first time and they asked me to come back with my birth certificate. [...] When I went back, a man who worked there told me that the location listed as the birthplace on the certificate had never hosted a maternity ward. I was so scared. I took the birth certificate and ran away without leaving a trace. [...] As the years went by, I told myself that my parents, unable to have children, had somehow found a way to have them.”

Laura continued her research, animated by a doubt that never stopped. But she acts partly in secret. Even though it has been more than fifteen years since she embarked on her

quest for "truth", Laura has never been able to confront her adoptive mother. She fears the potential legal repercussions – "I don't want to put her in a legal whirlwind" – and, while she says she is plagued by doubts and suspicions, she also says she "has to protect her". At the time of writing, Laura has suspended her search.

Still, in Argentina, most of the "appropriated" demand justice and reparations – turning "truth" into a political stake and an ethical requirement. The re-establishment of filiation previously severed allows past political crimes to exist in the present and ensures they are not forgotten. For the Argentinian *nietos*, the notion of "restoring truth" is important not only in terms of identity, but also with respect to gaining recognition for what their biological parents experienced and how their adoptive parents reacted. As Victoria, 39, explains during her interview: "As a child of the 'Disappeared', I felt beholden in regard to my parents and my past. My parents were militants, fighting for their ideas. They died because of this. For them, I want to continue the struggle. [Today] I am lucky to know who I really am. If it's only for that, I feel I have to reveal my story."

Besides, the truth – which is an unveiling – includes a curative function: it is supposed to treat direct victims of military violence (*nietos* and *abuelas*), but also the Argentinian society as a whole. That is why, for example, some of the *nietos* encountered are involved in actions undertaken by the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and other human rights organizations. This participation consists notably in establishing sites within various educational institutions where they can express themselves and communicate about the violence that took place. The fact that they exist and can tell their story seems to be undeniable proof that these facts are true. Thus, some *nietos*' accounts refute alternative narratives, such as a 1979 speech in which General Videla explained on Argentinian television that "the 'Disappeared' cannot receive special treatment, as someone who has

disappeared is neither dead, nor alive, he is just absent.” As Victor, a 38-year-old *nieto*, explains:

“For me, to go and see these children in school after school and tell them my story is in fact a way of also telling them their story. I want them to understand that they are the future of this country. By telling them what happened to us, they become aware of Argentina’s terrible past and in this way, can do something about it. [...] Also, it helps us, the children of the ‘Disappeared’ and all the people who have a missing family member. Talking about my parents has allowed me to spread their story, tell about their combat and keep them close to me.”

If the *nietos* arouse such compassion in Argentina, it is because their personal tragedies are not only self-signifying (Boltanski, 1999); they are also the metonymy of an era and regime. The narrative of their lives incarnates the political violence of the dictatorship years and the desire to keep the memory of past crimes alive. Yet, it also seems to be the sign of something “intolerable” (Fassin, 2011): that of having been betrayed by a civil authority that is supposed to guarantee the safety of individuals, both physically and psychologically. If their tragedies seem to be the incarnation of years of violence and repression, it is because the crime to which they were victims contains a force within it that makes it both unbearable and significant. They are not only the sign of State failure but also the living proof of public treachery. In Argentina, the State faulted when it absconded its role of performative archiving and allowed the “appropriation of children,” betraying the counterpart to its authority that makes its identifying, recording and archiving power legitimate.

## **Fraud as a Public Secret in Ethiopia**

When Mengistu Haile Mariam ceded his office to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991, several years after the fall of the *Derg* (1974-1987), he left an administration that had been bled dry. The new ruling party opted for a (slow) opening of the economy, without political liberalization (Labzaé 2021). On the contrary, the new government maintained (and benefited from) the repressive structures of previous regimes. And so, even if Ethiopia went through a phase of exceptional economic dynamism during the 1990s, elites and cadres maintained a highly repressive regime “coupled with mass poverty, enduring food insecurity and proneness to famine for millions of people” (Hagmann and Abbink 2011: 579). In a context where the Ethiopian society was facing major changes, and while almost eighty percent of its population remained poor, rural, and threatened by hunger, it appeared that child abandonment increased; in addition, many children were improperly registered, especially in the most remote areas. If records exist, they were often unreliable.

In the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the rapid increase in the number of HIV/Aids cases led to a nation-wide orphan crisis, presenting new challenges to existing orphanages. Intercountry Adoption (ICA) quickly appeared as a solution, facilitated by transnational NGOs. In a few years, Ethiopia became the largest sending country in Africa. According to Sebilu Bodja and Kristi Gleason, based on a report from *The African Child Policy Forum* (APCF), “the total number of ICAs for the whole of Africa for the period between 2002-2010 was 33,434, and Ethiopia was the top sending country with 21,368 for the same period” (2020: 53). The number of adoptions peaked around 2007-2008, before starting to decrease in Ethiopia as in the rest of the world. However, ICA in Ethiopia remained highly debated in the country and abroad, as Addis Ababa has been suspected of massive cover-ups of malpractice and ethical irregularities. During the 2010s, confronted with growing concerns

about child-rights violations, some countries progressively decided to ban or suspend international adoption from Ethiopia (such as Australia in 2012, Denmark in 2016, and France in 2016). In response, Ethiopia banned the adoption of children by foreigners in 2018, claiming that adoptees may be confronted with abuse and neglect overseas.

Maud was born in 1993 in Addis Ababa. Three years later, when her parents died in unknown circumstances, the little girl was taken in by the Sacred Heart of Jesus orphanage. In 1997, she was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Prigent – a Catholic couple in Normandy, France – via the charitable association *Les Enfants de La Lumière* (The Children of Light). In adopting the little girl, the Prigents wanted to remedy the infertility problems which they had suffered for several years, and “to give a little sister to [their] other child, Caroline.” Mr. Prigent worked as an independent taxi driver, his wife as an assistant bookkeeper. Maud has a slight handicap; due to a scarred ear, her hearing is impaired. In spite of this, the Prigents never hesitated to adopt the child, and she grew up with their family in a small French village.

In 2015, while she was finishing up her Bachelor’s degree in cinema at the University of Le Havre, Maud received a message via Facebook. A young woman named Beza, who resided in the northern part of Addis, contacted Maud in English, wanting to “talk with her.” Maud was wary of this unexpected request. Beza insisted, making reference to the scar on Maud’s ear. The correspondent also evoked an aunt who, she claimed, was hoping to reconnect with Maud.

Maud had only the vaguest traces of memory from her life in Ethiopia. She could not recall specific locations, nor the language spoken by those around her, nor individuals or their faces. Ever so faintly, she remembered the inside of a house where the accident causing her partial deafness might have taken place, and an aunt who would have accompanied her to the orphanage. But she had never spoken of these indistinct memories, not even to her parents or her sister. Maud and Beza started exchanging messages. After a few weeks, Beza informed



Maud that the woman whom Maud remembered as her aunt was in fact Maud's own mother – Yodit – who had for years been looking for a daughter named Kalkidan. The pictures that Beza sent to Maud in the meantime left little room for doubt. "They were pictures of me as a baby at a few months, at one year, three and six years old. It was incredible... because for me, my life started when I arrived in France. But here, I saw and recognized myself."

After a year of continued correspondence, Maud went to Addis Ababa to meet Yodit. "I knew what my mother looked like; I had seen the pictures and knew what to expect. Yet, it's highly paradoxical because it was my mother, my own flesh and blood, but at the same time, she was a stranger. [...] We recognized one another. She took me in her arms, we looked at each other, and I was no longer apprehensive. Usually, I don't cry very much. But at that moment, I couldn't stop. To be in her arms was magical."

Sébastien was able to meet Yodit during a trip to Addis, and she explained to him "what really happened." Yodit got pregnant when she was 15 years old. When Yodit's parents learned about their daughter's condition, they beat her. Fervently religious, they rejected their child, believing that she had disgraced the family. Yodit took refuge at the house of a neighbor, who took her in until the birth of her child in 1991. At Kalkidan's baptism, Yodit's parents agreed to let the young mother and child return home. Although Yodit had a roof over her head again, her family had still not forgiven her. She was forced to take on the most tiring and dishonorable domestic tasks. As she grew, Kalkidan was generally protected from the violence to which her mother was subjected. However, an incident radically changed the little girl's life at the age of three. Her young aunts, hardly much older, started bickering in the house courtyard. The quarrel got worse and the children started throwing stones at one another. A rock ricocheted, and Kalkidan, who was playing nearby, was inadvertently hit on the temple. Bleeding, she was urgently taken to the hospital. The doctors cleaned and bandaged the wound, reassuring Yodit that Kalkidan should suffer no lasting repercussions.

Two years later, however, one of Yodit's parents' friends came to visit the family, and noticed that the little girl did not react to sounds that came from her left side. Kalkidan was examined once again. This time the doctors found that the child had already become deaf in one ear. The diagnosis was alarming. According to the medical team, she would go totally deaf if appropriate care was not given. It seems that the blow she had received two years before caused more extensive damage than originally thought.

Yodit was dismayed: without an income, she was unable to pay for the treatment her daughter required. She quickly decided to contact Hiwot – a woman known in the neighborhood for “taking in” children to be put up for international adoption. Knowing that Hiwot was in touch with French adoptive associations, Yodit hoped that her daughter would be able to go abroad and receive the care she needed. Without telling her parents, the young mother decided on her own to relinquish Kalkidan. As often happens in Ethiopia, she pretended to the local authorities that she was an “aunt” who had taken in her niece after the girl's mother had passed away, but that she no longer had the means to educate her. A friend who was aware of the situation acted as her witness and guarantor. Since there were no centralized civil records that would allow the authorities to check the truth of her declaration, Yodit quickly obtained official documents. Kalkidan, whose two parents were still alive, officially became an orphan within just a few days. After several weeks spent with dozens of other children in Hiwot's yard, Kalkidan was transferred to the Sacred Heart of Jesus orphanage, where she was soon adopted by the Prigents. When I ask Yodit if she realized the consequences of what she had done, she murmured: “I thought I'd never see my daughter again, but I had no choice. Of course, I later regretted it. But I also hoped that God would allow me to see her again one day.”

This story, as singular as it may seem, is not unusual. At the beginning of the 2000s, concerns began to emerge from the sparse and fragmented memories of adopted children from

Ethiopia. Some of them spoke of “brothers,” “sisters,” or even “parents,” whereas their records stated they were “orphans” or “abandoned and with no known family.” At first, they were sometimes considered “lost,” or “traumatized,” or even, for the unluckier ones, “liars.” Today, their voices resound forcefully, echoing other victims of so-called “irregular adoptions” (Hernandez 2022; San Román and Rotabi 2019). Over the past several years, many have formed associations, or organized themselves in groups on social networks, where tragic stories of falsification have been shared.

Today, some adoptees return to Ethiopia to know the truth about the conditions of their birth. However, most are not as successful (or lucky) in their quests as Maud-Kalkidan has been. Many are confronted with reticence and ellipses. Today, such silence comes from the Ethiopian administration, but also from the very actors who were central to the international “circulation of children” (Briggs and Marre 2009), and who were active both locally and in the child’s country of destination: policemen, diplomats, medical doctors, lawyers, judges, intermediaries, religious groups, humanitarian actors, sometimes NGOs activists, etc. (Roux 2021). Certainly, the migration of children for adoptive purposes takes place in specific moral configurations, and the meaning of their mobility varies historically, socially, and spatially (Leinaweaver 2008). Nonetheless, the Ethiopian case is distinctive for the widespread and shared knowledge of a reality that no one dared to mention: the children’s civil status and files have often (but not systematically) been modified to “facilitate” their departure, with financial compensation. In Ethiopia, or at least in Addis-Ababa where [Author 2] conducted most of their fieldwork, most of the people they met consistently associated intercountry adoption with fraud, even corruption, regardless of their intimate proximity to the process (see also Cheney 2013). The presence of massive irregularities in the adoptive world was perceived as a well-known but hidden reality, a real “public secret” (Taussig 1999; Salvo

Agolia and Alfaro Monsalve 2019) of which everyone was aware, but which was also considered unmentionable.

Therefore, if in the Argentine case the bureaucratic falsifications correspond to a systemic state crime, in Ethiopia the repeated failures are more likely to represent a normalization of fraudulent behavior. Some have gained significant financial benefits from these irregularities, and have conducted activities inconsistent with the moral principles supposed to govern “adoptive migration” (Leinaweaver 2013). Yet, for a long time, these practices did not arouse massive indignation – at least until the adoptees (and, often, their adoptive families) made their anger, their incomprehension and their suffering heard and recognized.

### **Paradoxes of restoration**

There were many in Argentina and Ethiopia who hoped to find out who they “really” were once light was shed on the error and falsification to which they fell victim. These individuals imagined they would regain their rightful place once the truth was re-established, the narrative corrected and their identity revised. However, in the situations we were able to observe, souls remained troubled, identities wavered and quests were left unfinished. Falsifications carried on even after it was proven that the official documents had been tampered with. Omissions, lies, and deceit continued to have an effect even after they were revealed as such. Whereas knowledge of the truth was posited as a solution to the problem, it became progressively apparent that peace of mind seemed unattainable, a necessary but also impossible ideal.

Firstly, turmoil engenders turmoil, and alternative “narratives of self” often fail to resonate quite as strongly as originally held beliefs. Instead of having their “wrong” identities

corrected and replaced by their “true” ones, the individuals we met experienced partial additions and fragmented revisions, creating a sense of continuity rather than replacement (Ochs and Capps 1996). Thus Maud, an orphan from Ethiopia adopted at the age of 4 by a couple in Normandy, is *also* Kalkidan, 6 years old, a schoolgirl whose mother entrusted her to another so that her diagnosed deafness could be treated in France. As a teenager, Maud had doubts about her past and vaguely remembered an aunt who had taken her to an orphanage. Yet she pushed these fragmented memories to the back of her mind, trying to live as Maud. As an adult, Kalkidan knows that she is no longer this young schoolgirl and that she has two fathers, two mothers, two families; and that her life is not what she thought it was. Yet, she is not completely certain that her past has been rewritten once and for all; she still worries about the missing details, the incoherencies, and those elements of her story which might have been forgotten. Maud has not become Kalkidan (again). She is Maud *and* Kalkidan, a young woman who collects bits and pieces of narratives to reconstitute a new biographical linearity.

The same “addition” of identities can be found in the remarks of Carolina, a *nieta* who has recently become involved in politics:

I want to follow the same political path for which my biological parents ardently militated. The political conscience that cost them their lives has become the driving force with which I awake every morning.

*What have your appropriating parents brought to you?*

I know that it is thanks to these parents, those who appropriated me, that I am the person I am today. My biological parents could never have given me such a good education. I am quite aware of that!

*What do you mean by “such a good education”?*

Private school, language and music courses, etc. Everything that made me want to improve myself, to do well in everything I undertake.

Carolina is involved politically in the party she associates with her biological parents' beliefs. Moreover, she now uses the first name these parents gave her at birth, replacing Julieta, a name she no longer feels corresponds to the person she has become. Still, she has not chosen to use the surname of her *abuela* (grandmother), Garcia, but has kept her adoptive parents' last name, Perez. Towards them, she remains grateful and loving, feelings that have not been completely extinguished despite the revelations about their crime. Even if she is no longer Julieta Perez, she still does not wish to become Carolina Garcia again. She is Carolina Perez, indicating by her name the same reality as Maud-Kalkidan: that identities are intertwined and, as such, that they are attenuated and not as stable as they once were<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, revealing the truth about the past is not a gesture that cancels the past; nor is it one that necessarily assuages feelings or covers debts. Rather it allows fragile arrangements in which subjects deal with their different realities, creating *in situ* – often painfully – the narrative of a disrupted existence. The identity upheaval that the interviewees expressed and the existential anguish they experienced have been only partially mitigated. Currently, they are no longer the person they thought they were in the past, nor can they become that person again. The only definitive statuses they had were the *ad hoc* categories created for them; they were constantly reminded that they are and will remain “adoptees” or “*nietos*” – modern-day chimeras of hybrid identities condemned by public malfunction to remain blind to their “true” selves.

Secondly, the gesture that unveils the precariousness of contemporary identification might lead to alternative ways of defining the self. It is true that, in both ethnographic sites, some of the individuals who experienced embezzlement and counterfeiting did not claim to seek the restoration of their “initial” identity; conversely, they expressed the desire to

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<sup>6</sup> Noa Vaisman points out a similar logic in Victoria Donda's autobiography: *My name is Victoria* (2009). Ms Donda was named Victoria by her biological mother but renamed Analía by the couple who raised her. After a long and complex process of unveiling and self-redefining, Ms Donda writes “Victoria and Analía were in the end the same person. And that person was me” (p. 236, quoted in Vaisman 2012, p. 111).

maintain the position and identity produced by the violence to which they were subjected. In Argentina, some *nietos* have distanced themselves from the Abuelas movement or expressed their disinterest in genetic knowledge of their biological families (Vaisman 2012, p. 105). In France, where organizations have been formed for the recognition of child trafficking and capture, some adoptees, including those from countries most suspected of organized crime, have declared that they do not wish to engage in such identity quests, which they consider to be useless and even dangerous. However, the majority of the people we met during our fieldwork expressed desires of becoming “repaired” or “restored”. To confront the State’s strong powers of identification, as part of the process of defining oneself, might have fueled criticism of bureaucratic powers and their hold over us. But, most of our interviewees regretted the fact that the State had incorrectly exercised its power more than they regretted the principles by which such power was exercised in the first place. They requested that the documents that had not *correctly* identified them be rectified. Through these changes, they hoped their dramatic stories would be recognized and their integrity restored. It is through administrative and bureaucratic action that they hoped to be “re-established” and appeased at last. Yet, it seems to us that this driving desire may be understood as the need to be governed faultlessly in order to “know who one is” and to attain genuine selfness; the need to be subjected in order to be oneself and to only be oneself if subjected.

### **The Unbearable Need of Being(s)**

For the State, the task of establishing a bureaucratic narrative about its subjects is one of identification (About *et al.* 2013), which aims at watching, checking and registering. But this power is not only one of constraint; it has become a necessity. Seeing narratives diverge when they were supposed to correlate, most of our interviewees felt deep within themselves

the destabilizing force of doubt. When their suspicions were confirmed, and when faced with the brutal disappearance of the sense of selfhood they endlessly sought to recover, their distress was real. Hurt by public falsifications and bureaucratic lies, they told us they were incapable of getting a grip on who they were, or of thinking like “real” and “genuine” persons. Believing their real selves were concealed from them, they were seeking the truth about themselves in the reconstitution of a partially inaccessible past. For them, to know who they were, to understand themselves, was to be able to have access to a unique and coherent story of their past that public powers, as a result of their failings, could no longer guarantee. With no certainty about their civil status, and thereby having no guarantee of a valid administrative identification, they felt they would never be able to live their “real lives” nor to live them “truthfully”.

Because they had lost faith in their sense of themselves, the people we met were confronted with the power of institutions that hid who they were from them. We accompanied them for several months, sometimes several years. We witnessed how they tried to know who they were and to grasp their “real” selves. We occasionally participated in their initiatives and quests. But we especially saw them seek to re-establish the truth about themselves in calling upon others, constantly confirming their vulnerability and unsatisfied need to have a definitive narrative about who they are – a necessary but impossible task. What signification should be given to the search for identity among individuals who, despite their radical familiarity with the fragility and relativity of contemporary subjectivities, continue to believe in an authentic truth about the self?

The dramatic stories of Maud-Kalkidan, Zoé, Mercedes and Carolina lead us to examine a contemporary existential trouble, that of not being able to know who one is without the State’s intervention to identify, register and recognize oneself. They, as subjects, have access to themselves only if subjected, and can only hope to be recognized and legitimized



truly via the apparatus that governs them. As such, the misfortune of those we studied led us to think about the particularity of their experiences. It encourages us to grasp the force of narratives in individuals' knowledge about their own selves, and to show the difficulty, and for some the impossibility, of living outside the forces that identify and subjugate them.

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