

Searching for restoration

An ethnographic study of transnational adoption from Bolivia



Atamhi Cawayu

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor in Gender and Diversity Studies
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For all Bolivian families in search of their children

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List of abbreviations

CA	Central Authority
CRC	Convention of the Rights of the Child
DNA	<i>Defensoría de la Niñez y Adolescencia</i> (translated into English as local child protection service)
FCAA	Flemish Central Authority for Adoption
HCIA	Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, or in full, Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ONAMFA	<i>Organismo Nacional del Menor, Mujer y Familia</i> (translated into English as National Agency for Minors, Women and Family)
SEDEGES	<i>Servicios Departamentales de Gestión Social</i> (translated into English as: Departmental Social Management Services)
SIPPROINA	<i>Sistema Plurinacional de Protección Integral de la Niña, Niño y Adolescente</i> (translated into English as Integral Protection of Children and Adolescents)

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Preface: Reflections on becoming an abolitionist

The minor's case came to *Hogar Carlos de Villegas* on 13 October 1992 because he was reported as an abandoned minor by radio patrol 110 of the Mother and Child Centre *Santa María de los Angeles*. In order to guarantee the minor's social rights, he was declared abandoned by Decision No. 124/93 of 10 February 1993 and ordered to be entered in the Civil Registry under a conventional name as a ward of the State.

—La Paz, 26 March 1993

This extract is from a document granting my Belgian adoptive parents custody and, thus, permission to take me to Belgium, where the adoption was finalised.¹ These sentences are the only information about my pre-adoptive past in my adoption files. However, my adoptive parents have told me a fuller adoption story based on what they were told in the children's home and court in Bolivia. During my childhood and adolescence, I never questioned anything about adoption, nor did I feel the need to learn more about my origins. Only when I returned to Bolivia did I become interested in adoption, and I felt the urge to know more about my past.

In this preface, I briefly introduce myself as a researcher and explain how my background as an adopted person, adoptee activist, and adoption professional has been instrumental in shaping the outline of this thesis. The idea for this study arose from a personal desire to learn more about Bolivian first families and to gain a deeper understanding of the child protection and adoption system in Bolivia.² In academic and public debates about transnational adoption, little attention has been paid to first families and other stakeholders in countries of origin. Moreover, I met many Bolivian adoptees

1 Until 1993, children from Bolivia could be brought from Bolivia to the adoptive country through guardianship to finalise the adoption there.

2 In this dissertation, I deliberately use the terms 'first mothers/parents/families,' 'transnational adoption,' 'children's homes' and 'demand and supply countries.' A further explanation of my choice of terms can be found in Chapter 3, section 3.5.

online and offline in Europe and Bolivia before and during my doctoral studies. My involvement in the Bolivian adoptee community has been crucial to this study. This allowed me to learn about Bolivian adoptees' diverse experiences and understand the various issues they face when seeking additional information about their past or initiating a first-family search. Therefore, this dissertation is not just an academic endeavour but has also become an activist project driven by my desire to contribute to a critical awareness of the supply side of the transnational adoption system.

I hope this thesis's empirical chapters do justice to my participants' stories. Although my voice will undeniably be present throughout the thesis, I focus on the lived experiences of the first families and how these relate to the broader context of Bolivia's child protection and adoption system. That said, I would feel uncomfortable analysing other people's adoption stories in the empirical chapters of the dissertation without taking the space to tell my own story. So that is what I will do in this preface.

From orphan to activist³

Returning to Bolivia

During my childhood, I had no interest in Bolivia, despite my parents' attempts to arouse interest in my country of origin. It was only since my studies in sociology that I became interested in learning more about Bolivia. At age twenty, in 2013, I returned to Bolivia for the first time. Before this trip, several friends and relatives asked me if I would also go in search of my Bolivian parents or if I would visit my children's home. I told them that I did not feel the need to explore my adoption history nor initiate a first-family search. However, that first return trip left a deep impression on me. It triggered me to understand my own adoption story better.

Back in Belgium, I met Ana, a Bolivian adoptee born in a small village in rural Potosí, also in October 1992. During our meeting, I learnt that Ana had been reunited with her Quechua family for over a decade. She told me she had gotten to know her first family better and familiarised herself with their cultural traditions. Ana also told me that she considered her adoption a form of child trafficking. Ana explained that when her Quechua mother gave birth to twins, she did not have the means to care for both of them. Especially as one of the babies was ill (Ana) and needed medical care that the Bolivian parents could not afford. Belgian missionaries working in the area had overheard the story and

³ The title 'From Orphan to Activist' is a reference to the artwork with the same title of Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom.

suggested placing Ana with a Belgian couple keen to adopt a baby.⁴ Ana's first parents agreed to the adoption but felt pressured to decide quickly. Unfortunately, they soon regretted the adoption. Ana later explained that the adoption was not carried out according to the legal rules. Instead of a supervisory authority, unofficial intermediaries put the papers in order and issued a birth certificate with the adoptive mother's name. This made it look like the adoptive mother had given birth to Ana in Bolivia.

Ana's story made me question the legitimacy of transnational adoption. Until then, I had never considered a possible dark side to transnational adoption. I had never doubted the veracity of my adoption story or the authenticity of my adoption papers. I had not even considered the possibility that my Bolivian family might regret their decision or, worse, come looking for me. This was the start of taking a more critical stance towards transnational adoption.

Adoptee activism and community building

In the years following my return trip, I joined a local adoptee organisation *Te Awa* in Belgium. Attending their events allowed me to connect with a diverse group of transnational and domestic adoptees, broadening my perspective and deepening my understanding of the various adoptee experiences within the adoptee community. While some stories resonated with my own, others were vastly different. Meeting socially and politically engaged adoptees convinced me to join *Te Awa*'s core team in 2016. This way, I got to know the adoption field in Flanders and met the different actors (central authority, adoption agencies and other adoption organisations). In the same year, we were also invited at the last minute to participate in the hearing in the Flemish Parliament on the reforms of transnational adoption in Flanders. With Hà Logier, one of the founders of *Te Awa*, we presented our thoughts and recommendations on future adoption policy to the present politicians.⁵ This first experience with the political arena of adoption made me realise that efforts to change adoption policy can sometimes be very delicate and polarising. A year later, Hà and I decided not to continue with *Te Awa* as we both had other pursuits in life.

At the same time, I also started to connect with more and more Bolivian adoptees worldwide. In 2016, I came into contact with Vicente Mollestad, a Bolivian adoptee from Norway. Together we had the idea to set up something for Bolivian adoptees, which led

4 According to my observations, these Belgian missionaries were involved in transnational adoptions of approximately 20 children to adoptive families in Belgium and the Netherlands in the 1980s and early 1990s.

5 See report on the hearing on transnational adoption in the Flemish Parliament, 4 May 2016 (2015-2016), 600, pg. 50-66.

to the creation of the *Network of Bolivian Adoptees* in November 2017.⁶ With the network, we wanted to create a safe space where Bolivian adoptees could connect, exchange experiences, and share knowledge. The number of members grew steadily from then on. In 2019, we organised a first international gathering in Belgium, followed by a second in Sweden in 2020 and a third in Italy in 2022.⁷ These gatherings were a great success and motivated us to continue with new initiatives to strengthen our community. In 2020, we received funding from the Adoption Support Centre (Steunpunt Adoptie) in Flanders to compile an anthology on the lived experiences of Bolivian adoptees. This book, entitled *Communal Histories of Adoption and Displacement* (2022b), consists of twenty contributions written by Bolivian adoptees from all over the world.

Apart from our involvement in the *Network of Bolivian Adoptees*, Vicente and I also tried to stir up the debate on transnational adoption in Bolivia. In 2020, we lived in Bolivia and embarked on a joint first-family search. We both had little to no information about our Bolivian parents or relatives, so we decided to put up posters in the streets of La Paz and El Alto. The Bolivian media soon picked up our first-family search. In the days that followed, local and national news outlets and some radio stations covered our stories — something we had not expected at all. Our stories were framed as ‘abandoned babies adopted to Europe in search of their families.’⁸ We noticed that a romanticising portrayal of transnational adoption prevented many people from understanding why we wanted to search for our families. Nevertheless, we wanted to draw attention to the lack of institutional support in first-family searches and address the reproductive and global inequalities that structure transnational adoption.⁹ One of the highlights of the series of interviews with Bolivian news media was the 45-minute radio interview with María Galindo, one of the most prominent feminist voices in Bolivia. She invited us to her radio show to talk about the politics of transnational adoption.¹⁰

6 In 2019, Teresa Norman (Sweden) and in 2022 Louise Bastiaans Burbank (the Netherlands) joined the core team of the *Network of Bolivian Adoptees*.

7 For a more detailed introduction of the *Network of Bolivian Adoptees*, see Cawayu, Norman, and Mollestad (2022a).

8 In the following articles the headlines used the ‘abandoned baby’ trope: Unitel (2020, June 25) *Abandonados al nacer y luego llevados a Europa regresaron para buscar a su padres biológicos*; Infodiez (2020, June 25) *Dos jóvenes fueron abandonados al nacer y ahora buscan a sus padres biológicos*; Pagina Siete (2020, June 29) *Atamhi y Vicente buscan a su familia a más de 25 años de su abandono*.

9 See also the essays by Mollestad (2022) and Cawayu (2022) on our 2020 search action in Bolivia.

10 Radio interview with María Galindo (2020, July 22) *La adopción internacional es parte del colonialismo: 2 jóvenes adoptados en busca de sus orígenes*.

From activist to professional

Working at the Flemish Central Authority for Adoption

My first work experience was as a staff member and budget manager at the Flemish Central Authority for Adoption (FCAA).¹¹ As staff members, we were responsible for developing, supporting, and expanding the adoption services to ensure optimal and efficient functioning. I participated in numerous meetings with local, national, and international partner organisations and central authorities from other countries. When adoption agencies proposed new ‘adoption channels,’ i.e. new countries of origin from which to adopt, we assessed whether a country met the requirements for cooperation.¹² In doing so, we checked whether the adoption laws of the country in question were in line with Flemish adoption legislation, gained insight into the country’s child protection system, asked other central authorities about their experiences with the country in question, and checked whether there was a high risk of fraud or corruption. Each staff member was also assigned several countries of origin and thus became the contact person for the competent adoption agency and the central authority of the country of origin. For example, I was responsible for following up with the relevant stakeholders of several countries and had regular contact with the adoption agencies and central authorities concerned.

While working at the FCAA, I gained a behind-the-scenes understanding of how the central authorities and adoption agencies carried out adoptions. Additionally, I gained insight into the political decision-making process around adoption policy. As our tasks were enshrined in the Flemish adoption legislation, our ability to implement or amend adoption laws was limited. This sometimes presented us with challenges as we encountered the limits of our working possibilities. For instance, as a staff member, I was responsible for reviewing newly arrived adoption files from the countries under my purview, ensuring that they complied with adoption laws. On one occasion, I had to examine an adoption file that mentioned an older sibling. I wanted to verify if this sibling had been informed about the adoption. To do this, I contacted the relevant adoption agency and asked my question. The next day they confirmed via email that the sibling had been informed. Without proof from an official body in the country of origin to confirm this, I had to take the word of the adoption agency. At that moment, I felt

11 Every country that has signed the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption must appoint a Central Authority (CA) that supervises transnational adoption procedures. Belgium has four CAs, one Federal Central Authority and three CAs for every Community (Dutch, French, German).

12 The term ‘adoption channel’ is technical jargon used by the FCAA to refer to countries of origin.

responsible for ensuring that the message to the sibling was effectively delivered. However, due to the limit of my authority, I could not do much more than I would have wanted to do. This and other experiences made me reflect on the limited ability to verify files and the limited power of a central authority to control whether or not everything was done correctly.¹³

Academia and its social impact

After gaining work experience at the FCAA I was fortunate to be awarded a doctoral fellowship by the Research Foundation – Flanders. This was a dream come true, allowing me to investigate transnational adoption in Bolivia. In the years before, my current PhD supervisor introduced me to the interdisciplinary field of Critical Adoption Studies. The more I engaged with the work of adoption scholars, the stronger my passion for adoption studies became. As part of my second Master's in Gender and Diversity Studies, I wrote my thesis on race and belonging in the Bolivian adoptee community in Belgium. This experience equipped me with the necessary skills to write a research proposal under the excellent guidance of my supervisor.

I started my academic journey at Ghent University with great enthusiasm. I further familiarised myself with adoption studies, as well as feminist, decolonial, and anthropological scholarship. I became inspired by fellow academics who combined their activism and academic work to generate social change. However, my experiences in academia were also disenchanting. I began to see its elitist and white character and realised it did not provide the safe and inclusive environment I had hoped for.

During my doctoral journey, I was happy to be involved in the organisation of an international symposium on transnational adoption in Brussels in 2019. We, the organisers, felt it was important to disseminate the knowledge developed in Critical Adoption Studies among professionals, stakeholders, and people directly affected, to build a bridge between these different fields and to facilitate a constructive dialogue between all parties. The event was well received, even though it provoked some backlash, especially from adoption agencies who downplayed the relevance of the studies presented.¹⁴ Later that year, in response to testimonies from several adoptees and their adoptive families about illicit transnational adoption practices, the Minister of Welfare, Health, and Family (2009-2019), Jo Vandeuren, set up a government-appointed panel to investigate transnational adoption. The Expert Panel on Intercountry Adoption was tasked with assessing past and present adoption practices, and experts in the field of

¹³ The operation of the Central Authority is based on a principle of trust through the ratification of the Hague Convention.

¹⁴ For further personal reflections on the symposium, see Cawayu (2023).

adoption and child protection were invited to be part of it. Shortly after the initial composition of the panel, I was also invited to join.¹⁵ Over two years, the members of the Expert Panel met multiple times to discuss possible recommendations for adoption policy based on the research conducted for this panel.¹⁶ The result of our work was a final report, published in September 2021, containing twenty recommendations for future adoption policy and repair.¹⁷ Our main proposal was to introduce a paradigm shift, transforming the demand-driven adoption system into a passive adoption system, where the request for transnational adoption comes from the countries of origin and not from the adoption agencies. It was encouraging that the Minister of Welfare, Health and Family (2019-2022), Wouter Beke, initially followed our recommendations. Many adoptees and some adoptive parents also seemed satisfied with the recommendations. Nevertheless, several politicians, adoption agencies and many prospective adoptive parents also heavily criticised the report. As a result of the criticism, only a slimmed-down version of the panel's proposal was taken into account in drafting a new framework for transnational adoption.¹⁸ In other words, policymakers and stakeholders preferred more minor reforms than the radical changes recommended by the experts.

From professional to abolitionist

My experiences and insights in the field of adoption have made me wary of the frequent adoption reforms in Belgium and Bolivia. Despite decades of adjustments to make the transnational adoption system more rigorous, the same discussions are held every few years to reform the adoption system again. In my view, these reforms fail to address the root of the local and global inequalities that underlie transnational adoption and serve to protect the interests of the various actors on the demand side of transnational adoption. As a result, I view the reforms with scepticism and have been inspired by the growing

15 Adoptees heavily criticised the initial composition of the Expert Panel because the committee members were all white experts and came mainly from the field of law. As a result, the commission was given the opportunity to expand the number of members so that Miranda N. Aerts (psychology), myself (social sciences) and later Sophie Withaecx (ethics) and Chiara Candaele (history) could join the panel.

16 The commission decided to outsource research to various universities. Thus, transnational adoption was approached from five different disciplines: ethics, law, psychology, history, and social sciences. As a researcher, I was part of the Historical and Social Scientific Working Group (see Cammu, Candaele, Cawayu, & Van de Velde, 2021).

17 For the final report, see *Expertenpanel Interlandelijke Adoptie* (2021).

18 For more information on the policy recommendations for adoption reform in 2023, see *Agenschap Opgroeien* (2023, 3 January) *Beleidsvoorstellen hervorming adoptie, in verbinding met pleegzorg*.

abolitionist movement in academic and activist circles. This movement calls for the dismantling of oppressive systems and structures. A side branch of this movement is concerned with child protection and adoption issues, seeking to imagine new ways of caring for children and their families. It has also inspired me to call myself an abolitionist. Some may see the call for abolition as radical, but I believe that we need this revolution to envision a future where the interests of children and their families are at the centre. This dissertation needs to be situated within this growing movement. Abolition is not just a theoretical framework but a transformative justice movement led by directly impacted communities. An abolitionist praxis centres these voices and recognises the knowledge they produce. According to these perspectives, abolition is necessary to enable new horizons of liberation, support, and care and begin a process of acknowledging, repairing, and redressing past wrongdoings. This vision also applies to the transnational adoption system, where these abolitionist views permeate adoptee communities.

Chapter 1 Introduction

“We want parents! We want parents! We want parents!” On 12 April 1994, the annual Day of the Bolivian Child, children and staff from the children’s home Hogar Carlos de Villegas blocked the road to keep traffic off the normally busy street in La Paz (La Razon, 1994b).¹ Organised by the management of the children’s home, the children shouted slogans and carried signs saying “Give me a father and a mother and I’ll give you a smile” to draw attention to the resumption of (transnational) adoption so that these orphaned children would be eligible for adoption again (ibid.). A year earlier, in 1993, adoptions had been temporarily suspended because the government had decided to revise the entire adoption system to prevent illegal adoption practices (ibid.). By the end of 1994, domestic and transnational adoption procedures resumed. Children from *Hogar Carlos de Villegas* — and other children’s homes in Bolivia — were again eligible for adoption trajectories, following the reforms implemented to ensure stricter, safer, and more ethical adoptions. Nonetheless, the issue of irregular adoption had also been discussed at length decades before. Ten years earlier, at the *Third Inter-American Specialised Conference on Private International Law* in La Paz in May 1984, special attention was paid to transnational adoption practices of the participating Latin American governments. A representative from Bolivia, José Gordillo, expressed his concern about transnational adoption in Bolivia to the local newspaper, saying, “It is turning into child trafficking, and our governments must take urgent measures to prevent it” (Ultima Hora, 1984).² The Inter-American Conference emphasised that adoption decisions should be made with the best interests

1 This unique protest was part of a series of children’s protests in La Paz. While the children and staff of Hogar Carlos de Villegas protested for the resumption of adoption procedures, other children and adolescents demanded the free issuance of birth certificates, the separation of adult prisoners from child prisoners, the recognition of child labour and so on. Central to these demands was the immediate application of the Minor’s Code, which was introduced in 1992 (La Razon, 1994a).

2 Six months earlier, several Bolivian newspapers reported on a toddler who was kidnapped by child traffickers in Santa Cruz de la Sierra and eventually ended up with an adoptive family in Belgium (El Deber, 1983).



Figure 1: 'The children and their hope for a family' (original caption, translated to English) in *100 años de amor: Hogar Carlos de Villegas* by Maria Angélica Kirigin (2011, p. 54)

of children in mind and that every effort should be made to ensure that children end up in suitable adoptive families and do not become victims of child trafficking, exploitation or abuse (Presencia, 1984). To this end, they drafted a convention to regulate

transnational adoption practices, the *Inter-American Convention on Conflict of Laws concerning the Adoption of Minors*, which was unanimously adopted by all nine participating states at the end of the conference.³ This Convention can be seen as a milestone for protecting children from irregular and profitable adoption practices in Latin America in the 1980s. It can be considered a forerunner of the later *Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption* (HCIA). Nevertheless, the discussion about streamlining adoption procedures in Bolivia remains topical. Some children who were once placed in the *Hogar Carlos de Villegas* — or elsewhere in Bolivia — and then adopted abroad, have joined the global adoptee movement as adults to point out irregularities in the current transnational adoption system and even to call for the end of transnational adoption as we know it.

1.1 Shifts in the global adoption debate

The phenomenon of transnational adoption has long been seen as an inherently good practice and is still often considered a ‘win-win-win situation’ (Park Nelson, 2016, p. 91). It is believed to benefit the unwanted child —as it finds a forever home, the adoptive parents —as it fulfils their desire to raise a child, and the first family—as it relieves them of the burden of caring for the child (ibid.). However, since the last decade, the public discourse on transnational adoption has started to shift. More adoptees have come forward to denounce the systematic abuses in the transnational adoption system, after encountering irregularities such as fraud, coercion and abduction, often in their own adoption histories (Branco, 2021). According to Kimberly D. McKee (2019, p. 126), the growing adoptee movements have resulted in adoptees becoming ‘change agents’ who seek ways to break the romanticised view that the transnational adoption system tries to uphold. Moreover, the rise of adoptee activism and advocacy has even led to government-installed commissions and investigations in several European countries such as the Netherlands (2019-2021), Belgium (in the Flemish Community; 2019-2021), Switzerland (2019-2020), Sweden (2021-present) and France (2022-present) to investigate past and current adoption practices. The establishment of these commissions is not unique in the history of transnational and transracial adoption. It has stark parallels with the truth commissions that opened pathways to restorative justice and reconciliation for other historically displaced and adopted groups, such as the Métis people in Belgium (Belgische

³ The convention was signed by governmental representatives of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 2018) and, a little further afield, the Stolen Generations in Australia (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

The three completed investigations in the countries mentioned above concluded that despite numerous reforms, the current transnational adoption system is still riddled with irregularities and weaknesses. The Swiss report recommended thoroughly evaluating and reforming transnational adoption policy (Conseil Fédéral, 2020). The Flemish report advised a temporary suspension of transnational adoption until a paradigm shift from a demand-driven adoption system to a passive adoption system has taken place, where adoptions would be, among other things, only carried out at the request of the countries of origin (Expertenpanel Interlandelijke Adoptie, 2021).⁴ The Dutch committee went further in its report, stating that it had ‘serious doubts whether it is possible to design a realistic alternative system’ and recommended a moratorium on transnational adoption (Commissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie, 2021a, p. 22).⁵ Following the publications of these reports, it led to fierce discussions in social media and the press with proponents and opponents of transnational adoption. These reports have also had an impact in other European countries, with countries such as Sweden and France following suit and launching official investigations into the transnational adoption system in their respective countries.⁶

This debate on the desirability of continuing transnational adoption is a global one which takes place in both the demand and supply sides of the transnational adoption system, but often without including the voices of first families. At a larger academic level, several articles and book chapters have been devoted to this adoption debate (Bartholet & Smolin, 2012; Martin, 2007), the future or end of transnational adoption (McKee, 2019; Park Nelson, 2016), and whether it is appropriate to suspend the transnational adoption system (Smolin, 2021). Scholars in the field of Critical Adoption Studies have addressed the global inequalities that structure transnational adoption practices by examining the relevant historical, social, and political contexts. Since the early 2000s, various researchers have contributed to a more critical understanding of transnational adoption in academic and public debates (Ahluwalia, 2007; Bos, 2007; Briggs & Marre, 2009; Dorow, 2006; Eng, 2003; Fonseca, 2003; Howell, 2006; Hübinette, 2007; E. Kim, 2003; Leifsen, 2008; Leinaweaver, 2008; Park Nelson, 2006; Yngvesson, 2003). This earlier work has paved the

4 Despite the recommendations of the Expert Panel, the Flemish government decided not to suspend transnational adoption, but instead formulated some broad outlines for reforming the adoption system, see CD&V (2021, 10 September) *Vlaanderen zet ambitieuze hervorming van adoptiewetgeving in de steigers*.

5 More than a year after the suspension, the Dutch government decided to restart transnational adoption procedures and opted for a system with stricter conditions and a unified adoption agency, among other things, see Rijksoverheid (2022, 11 April) *Weerwind: Adoptie uit het buitenland alleen onder striktere voorwaarden*.

6 See for Sweden, Human Rights Watch (2021, February 22) *Sweden To Investigate Illegal Intercountry Adoptions*; see for France, Ministère de la Justice (2022, 7 November) *Pratiques illicites dans l'adoption internationale*.

way for introducing an abolitionist perspective on transnational adoption. An abolitionist view of transnational adoption aims to dismantle the oppressive and harmful logics and mechanisms in adoption. It invites us to envision a more just and equitable world where the needs of children and their families are met. Such a perspective believes in transformative change that goes beyond traditional reforms. Instead, it offers us a radically different view of care and parenting in a transnational setting.

1.2 Objectives and research questions

This study aims to explore the social contexts and perspectives of Bolivian families whose children have been adopted transnationally to the Global North. Current adoption research has paid little attention to the voices of first mothers, fathers, and other relatives, leaving a major gap in our understanding of the complexities and social mechanisms that structure the relinquishment and removal of children. By focusing on their stories, we gain insight into their experiences with the child protection and adoption system and better understand the conditions under which care was terminated and surrendered. In addition to these perspectives, I take into account the voices of child welfare professionals. The involvement of these professionals can shed light on what efforts were made to preserve families. Their accounts also provide insights into how children are made adoptable. The study also includes the perspectives of Bolivian adoptees placed with adoptive families in the North. Many of these adoptees have reached an age where they seek interest in their origins. Their testimonies give us insight into their search for belonging and community and their attempts to seek information about their first families.

The voices of people in the Global South, i.e. first families and child welfare professionals in Bolivia, provide powerful counternarratives to the dominant adoption discourse in research and policy, which has been shaped almost exclusively by actors in the Global North, on the other end of the transnational adoption system. Moreover, the testimonies of Bolivian adoptees have the potential to undermine the prevailing understanding of origins and the search for the first family — which are too often explained in psychological terms. All of these perspectives can give us a deeper insight into the circumstances, ideologies, and power dynamics that shape decisions about relinquishing and taking away children and the search for first families. They also offer a view into the gendered, classed and raced narratives of motherhood, kinship, and families that are played out in transnational policy and practice. Finally, these findings provide rich material for examining the technologies of care and control intertwined with the transnational adoption system.

The geographical focus of this study is Bolivia. To date, very little attention has been paid to formal adoption in Bolivia, except for a study by Anne-Marie Piché (2015) on domestic adoption in Cochabamba. According to Peter Selman (2009), transnational adoption has developed in Latin America since the 1970s, leading to a large number of adoptions to the Global North. Also in Bolivia, transnational adoption circuits started to emerge in the early 1970s (see also Chapter 4, 4.2.1). There have been studies on child adoptions in other South American countries, such as Argentina (Arditti, 1999; Gesteira, 2016; Villalta, 2006b), Brazil (Cardarello, 2009; Fonseca, 2010), Chile (Salvo Agoglia & Alfaro Monsalve, 2019), Colombia (Delord, 2017; Hoelgaard, 1998), Ecuador (Leifsen, 2008) and Peru (Leinaweaver, 2008). Bolivia, however, has been largely neglected in research. Nevertheless, this country is particularly interesting because of the high proportion of indigenous children placed with adoptive families. The adoption of indigenous children in the white settler colonies of the British Empire — the United States, Canada and Australia — has been widely studied, and various scholars have considered these adoptions as mechanisms of control and policing in the context of ‘civilisation’ and forced assimilation (Briggs, 2020; Jacobs, 2014; Turner Strong, 2001). Focusing on Bolivia’s adoption and child protection system, therefore, has the potential to shed new light on the power mechanisms and colonial legacy involved and allows us to further deconstruct the narrative that depicts transnational adoption as merely a matter of child welfare and transnational charity.

The central research question of this study is formulated as follows: *Under what conditions and contexts do child relinquishment, child removal and searches take place in transnational adoption from Bolivia?* This central question is divided into four sub-questions that correspond to the four empirical chapters of this dissertation:

(1) *What strategies do first families develop and employ in searching for their children?* This first sub-question allows us to document the attempts of the first families in relocating their children who have been adopted transnationally, including their desire or reluctance for continued contact or reunion with their children.

(2) *How do adoption files and reports portray first families in Bolivia?* This second sub-question explores the prevailing discourses and ideologies shaped by institutional and global contexts about what is considered good parenting and child-rearing practices.

(3) *How do first families experience the intervention of child welfare professionals?* This third sub-question investigates the interaction between first families and child welfare professionals. It explores to what extent the families are supported, policed or controlled by these professionals.

(4) *What are the experiences of Bolivian adoptees in exploring their origins?* This final sub-question examines Bolivian adoptees’ interest and attempts in their search for cultural and racial belonging, pre-adoptive information and contact with their first families.

The study is underpinned by feminist, abolitionist and decolonial thought and is based on a social constructivist anthropological epistemology (A. Y. Davis, Dent, Meiners, &

Richie, 2022; Mignolo, 2005; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Applying a feminist approach to decolonial and abolitionist thinking in studying transnational adoption practices gives us radical tools to envision new ways of caring and parenting in the context of global inequalities. The voices of first parents and extended families, child welfare professionals and Bolivian adoptees provide a fuller understanding of the child protection and adoption system in Bolivia and the contexts and mechanisms that shape the relinquishment and removal of children and the social production of adoptees. Not only does this study make an important contribution to the sociological and anthropological literature on transnational adoption and the child protection system, but its findings have great potential to inform advocacy and social policy. The new knowledge gained may help to revise child welfare programmes for families in need so that their needs and desires are better recognised and protected. Finally, the study can help us understand how to dismantle the current child protection and transnational adoption system and offer a new vision of care for children that starts from healing the collective trauma of historical and social injustice.

1.3 Outline of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of eight chapters. After this first chapter, I move on to Chapter 2, in which I present the state of the art of the abolitionist approach and its relevance to the child protection system. I also discuss the developments and directions in the field of Critical Adoption Studies, in which this study is situated. Chapter 3 explains the epistemological and methodological underpinnings and provides a detailed description of the research process, methods, research ethics, and terminology used in this study.

Chapter 4 explores the relationship between extraction and resistance in transnational adoption by examining irregular adoption's impact on Bolivian first families. It gives a brief overview of the development of the transnational adoption system through the various Minor's and Children's Codes and conventions that have been introduced over the years. I then address the stories of the first families whose children were adopted in the 1980s due to what I call 'extractive' adoption practices. I discuss how these families resisted these outcomes by searching for their children during this period. I also explore the experiences of families whose children were adopted under the newer adoption legislation after the millennium to examine their attempts to reconnect with their children. Chapter 5 looks at the unmaking of first families by analysing how these families are portrayed in adoption files. A critical analysis reveals the purported objectivity of adoption documents and reports and unpacks the prevailing narratives circulating in the child protection and adoption system. I explore how these dominant discourses are

present in the institutional language used in social reports and home descriptions. I show how the prevailing discourses draw from middle- and upper-class values and are embedded in the evaluation and description of the families. The chapter also sheds light on the punitive and regulatory character of the Bolivian child protection system, which often places poor and marginalised families under state supervision. Chapter 6 builds on the previous chapter and looks at the stories of three first families. Their accounts reveal how they faced practices of coercion and deception by child welfare professionals that led to the adoption of their children. It shows how these professionals often prefer institutionalisation and adoption over family reunification, based on paternalistic beliefs about what is in the child's best interest. Chapter 7 critically analyses the narratives of Bolivian adoptees in Belgium. It discusses how the adoptees look back upon the imagery of family and culture invoked by their parents and wider social environment and how this imagery has affected their sense of self and belonging. The chapter argues that the adoptees' narratives testify of a discursive struggle to reclaim control over their lives and histories. While they draw upon prevailing discourses that tend to imagine adoptees as 'wounded', they do so in diverse, complex and at times contradictory ways. Their perceptions of the familial and cultural imagery show that while they do not entirely reject the idea of being hurt, they seem to make a shift from explaining this 'wound' in individual-psychological terms to explaining it in social terms, making use of emerging anti-racist and decolonial perspectives.

Chapter 8 contains the general conclusions drawn from the empirical findings of this investigation and addresses the practical implications.

Chapter 2 Abolition, family policing, and transnational adoption

In this chapter, I explain what an abolitionist view of child protection and adoption conveys. I discuss the emerging scholarship on abolitionist theory, particularly how child welfare scholars apply it to the field of child protection. I then provide a state of the art of Critical Adoption Studies. I outline developments in the field and review the literature on first families, search, and reunion.

2.1 Towards an abolitionist approach on the child welfare and adoption system

Adoption is often presented as a child protection measure in favour of children permanently placed in institutional care. Scholars in the fields of pedagogical or psychological sciences tend to argue that orphaned children fare better in family-based care than in institutional care, proving the effectiveness of this measure in protecting children (van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2022). Despite the numerous studies on the impact of institutionalisation, there has been limited interest in institutional care from the social sciences (Edwards, 2016, p. 576; Fong, 2020, p. 616). Kelley Fong (2020) notes that sociologists have often focused on the interaction of marginalised people with bureaucratic institutions, such as health care, education, and welfare. She notes that a sociological examination of the child protection system can reveal the social impact and consequences of child removal and institutionalisation. A growing body of sociological literature has examined various aspects of the child protection system in several states of the USA (e.g. Edwards, 2016; Fong, 2020; Lee, 2016; Reich, 2005). These studies have highlighted how the state seeks to protect children by monitoring parental behaviour and, in the worst cases, taking children away from parents — what some see as ‘coercive

welfare intervention' (Edwards, 2016, p. 575). In addition, feminist approaches to the child welfare system have emphasised the often precarious position of mothers whose children are sometimes wrongfully removed and placed in institutional care (Dreath Zeman, 2008; Dunkerley, 2017; Michalsen, 2019; Roberts, 2014). Feminist scholars have viewed these child separations as a violation of the reproductive rights of often marginalised mothers and families, and have noted that these events occur mainly in the context of imperialist and repressive regimes (Briggs, 2020). Recent literature on the child protection system has explicitly called for its abolition (e.g. Briggs, 2021; Nourie, 2021; Roberts, 2022), repeating earlier calls, including the one of Dorothy Roberts (2002, p. x) in her influential book *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* to 'finally abolish what we now call child protection.' A symposium was held in June 2021 to commemorate Roberts' book, and subsequently, the *Columbia Journal of Race and Law* published a special issue on abolishing child protection and opening new horizons for reconceptualising child welfare. It is important to note that abolition does not simply mean the end of the adoption and child protection system, but refers to a process of dismantling these child welfare practices to allow for the exploration of alternative forms of care.

2.1.1 What is abolition?

An abolitionist praxis imagines a radically different future where designs, practices and policies are drastically altered, and no actors are in danger of losing their humanity through carceral logics that regulate, control, and punish (Cullors, 2019). Abolitionist approaches are not new and are rooted in the antislavery movements (A. Y. Davis, 2003). The demand for abolition has never disappeared and has even gained popularity in recent years. Due to its activist character, an abolitionist framework is also considered a 'practical theory of change' (Critical Resistance in Roberts, 2021, p. 460). Abolition is thus not just a theory but has emerged in activist movements, often initiated by those directly affected by oppressive systems. Black Lives Matter activist and scholar Patrisse Cullors (2019, p. 1685) describes abolition as a 'praxis' that enables us to transform the world. Disability scholar Liat Ben-Moshe (2020, p. 116) even describes abolition as a 'specific epistemology' that is 'counterhegemonic' because it opposes the status quo and dismantles prevalent discourses. She points out that it is 'a revolutionary framework that transforms the way we analyze and understand forces that shape our histories and everyday lives' (ibid). Feminist scholar Davis and her colleagues argue that abolition is 'unimaginable without our radical, anticapitalist, antiracist, decolonial, queer feminism' (A. Y. Davis et al., 2022, p. xii). They argue that abolition and feminism are two movements that are inextricably linked. In their book *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* they coin the term 'abolition feminism' and state that 'abolitionist theories and practices are most compelling when they are also feminist, and conversely, a feminism that is also

abolitionist is the most inclusive and persuasive version of feminism for these times' (A. Y. Davis et al., 2022, p. 2). In doing so, they also underline the labour of feminists in placing care at the heart of social transformation. They describe the contemporary principles on which abolition is based as follows:

1) taking leadership from those who are most directly impacted, so that the work incorporates the perspectives of the system's direct targets and not simply their more comfortably situated defenders; 2) calling for dismantling institutions that are overtly causing social and civil death; 3) broadening the liberatory agenda to include apparatuses of oppression beyond those that are specifically understood to be carceral; and 4) linking contemporary abolition praxis –theory plus action and reflection– to questions of racial capitalism (A. Y. Davis et al., 2022, p. 55)

An abolitionist perspective calls for the abolition of oppressive structures and carceral logics, especially in institutional settings. Moreover, abolitionists seek a non-carceral future that restores the full humanity of individuals and frees them from these harmful systems (Ben-Moshe, 2020; Kaepernick, 2021a). Cullors (2019, p. 1686) also shows that abolition is not only intended 'to destabilize, deconstruct, and demolish oppressive systems, institutions, and practices' but also calls for reparation and restorative justice by building a 'culture that is rooted in care, dignity and accountability' (p.1694). Educator Mariame Kaba (2021, p. 5) indicates that it is essential to ask different questions that allow us to imagine a variety of new possibilities and abolitionist futures. In doing so, we should not ask how we can improve the system but rather what we need for a better world without these systems.

This abolitionist framework was developed mainly by the activists and scholars in the USA to critique the prison industrial complex and the carceral state (see, for example, Ben-Moshe, 2020; A. Y. Davis, 2003; A. Y. Davis et al., 2022; Gilmore, 2007; Kaba, 2021; Kaepernick, 2021b; Purnell, 2021a). Even in Latin America, there is a growing feminist anti-carceral movement in various countries.¹ As historian Carlos Aguirre (2007) describes, Latin American societies became increasingly interested in the incarceration model in North America and Europe during the nineteenth century. Applying an abolitionist perspective in the Latin American context, which also has a history of European colonisation and slavery, does not seem so strange. Contemporary views on prison abolition have also found acceptance in wider society. Mainly, since the summer of 2020, there has been global outrage over increasingly visible police brutality against

1 In 2020, the international organisation Red Feminista Anticarceraria de América Latina was founded, consisting of different collectives and organisations in Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina and Mexico fighting against mass incarceration. Feminist anti-carceral views are also emerging in Bolivia; see for example, the 'Charla Anticarceraria' organised in La Paz by La Casa de la Chola in April 2022, <https://fb.watch/cxg3KhhKmv/> (accessed 21 April 2022); the feminist organisation Mujeres Creando also takes an abolitionist stance.

Black people. As a result, the call to defund the police and prison abolition resonated with more and more people around the world (Purnell, 2021a). The call to abolish carceral institutions goes beyond prisons and the police system. Researchers have applied these insights to other fields; for example, in disability research, which has been accompanied by a plea for psychiatric deinstitutionalisation (Ben-Moshe, 2020). In the field of child protection, abolitionist scholars have called for dismantling the child protection system and exposing its carceral logic (Roberts, 2022). It is important to note that alongside these abolitionist approaches, there are other schools of thought with similar principles, such as the radical feminist and queer Marxist traditions, which call for a radical reshaping of society through the dismantling of patriarchal structures of oppression. Sophie Lewis's book (2022), for example, advocates for the abolition of the family, building on the earlier work from radical queer politics of the 1960s and 1970s. The book renews these calls and proposes the annihilation of the institution of the family in order to imagine an anti-capitalist and feminist future in which children are not treated as property.

2.1.2 From 'child welfare' to 'family policing'

Inspired by the prison abolition movement, scholars of history, social science, and law concerned with child protection have found that child welfare is not as much about *welfare* and *protection* as it might seem, but rather about policing and punishment. Leading scholar Roberts (2002, p. 74) wrote two decades ago that the child welfare system is 'designed not as a way for governments to assist parents in taking care of their children but as a means to punish parents for their failures by threatening to take their children away.' She concludes that the name *child welfare system* is a misnomer and misleading. In recent years, new terms have been sought to describe this system more accurately (Roberts in Rise, 2020; Williams, 2020). Roberts eventually settled on the term *family-policing system* as she felt this term more accurately described the purpose and impact of the system in which families are at risk of being regulated, policed, punished or destroyed (Roberts in Rise, 2020). She goes on to argue that the family-policing system is part of the same carceral regime as the police and prison systems, and argues that family policing is 'designed to maintain racial injustice by punishing families in place of meeting human needs' (Roberts, 2021, p. 461). Miriam Mack (2021, p. 770) precedes Roberts' work by describing three pillars central to the family-policing system: pathology, control and punishment. The first pillar refers to the pathologisation of marginalised families by attributing their parental deficits to their own failures in parenting rather than to the 'structural issues of racism, poverty, housing- and food-insecurity' that disproportionately affects marginalised families (Mack, 2021, p. 781). Burton and Montauban (2021, p. 667) support this view, describing how this system often equates poverty with child neglect by disregarding (or perpetuating) these structural problems and focusing instead on

‘individual parental pathology and deviant behavior.’ They argue that families in poverty are, therefore, not less able to love or care than wealthier families (as the dominant discourses on child poverty seem to suggest) but that they face greater challenges in meeting the basic material needs of their children. Therefore, it would be more logical to remedy this material injustice than to remove children from their families. The second pillar points to the controlling aspect of the family-policing system. The state authorities supervise, monitor, and control families at different times, and their suitability to continue caring for their children is assessed. Roberts (2022, p. 165) describes how social investigations can go far into families’ privacy through unannounced home visits, interrogating relatives and neighbours, and requesting personal information from service providers. Mack (2021, p. 781) argues that state agencies often present their interventions as forms of ‘care’ and ‘support,’ which obscures the regulatory nature of the system. The third pillar refers to the punitive element of the system, which has been criticised by various scholars (see e.g. Edwards, 2016; Mack, 2021; Roberts, 2022). Parents who fail to comply with the requirements imposed by state authorities risk losing custody of their child or having their parental rights terminated. As described by Mack (2021, p. 804), the state thus has the coercive power to separate children from their parents and families forcibly. Roberts’ (2012) analysis adds that these parents are punished because they do not conform to the White hegemonic parenting ideals on which the racial geography of the system is based. Although most of the theorising of the family-policing system emerged in a North American context, it seems valuable to explore the extent to which they can be applied to systems in Latin America, given the influence of Northern discourses and notions of childhood, care and protection in the expansion of Latin American child protection and welfare systems (see Milanich, 2013).

Moreover, several scholars point out that the current USA family-policing system is a historical continuation of earlier child removal practices and policies (Briggs, 2021; Burton & Montauban, 2021; Roberts, 2022). According to Roberts (2021, p. 462), the origins of this system can be traced to the ‘forcible separation of enslaved families, the control of emancipated Black children as apprentices to former white enslavers, and removal of Indigenous children as an instrument of tribal genocide.’ Roberts draws on the work of feminist historian Laura Briggs (2020), whose book *Taking Children: A History of American Terror* shows how child-taking has been used as a strategy to terrorise Black and Indigenous families in North and Latin America over the past centuries. Furthermore, others point out that these child removal practices are rooted in the colonial idea of ‘rescuing’ children from their racialised families and communities and placing them in boarding schools or with White adoptive and foster families (Polikoff & Spinak, 2021). Therefore, various scholars conclude that the family-policing system is rotten at the root and needs to be demolished along with other carceral and punitive systems in order to transform our society into a safer world with new structures of care that respect families and children’s needs with dignity, respect, and humanity.

2.1.3 Beyond reforms and towards new horizons of liberation

As described in the introduction to this dissertation, there have been debates about reforming the transnational adoption system for decades. Those who advocate for the abolition of this system are often considered radicals by various adoption stakeholders and even by some adoption scholars.² Davis and colleagues (2022, p. 53) note that abolition is accompanied by much resistance and describe how the emerging prison abolitionists at the end of the last century understood how difficult ‘it would be to attempt to move away from a prison system that had been made to appear natural and permanent, just as putting an end to the system of transatlantic racial slavery once seemed an impossible goal.’ Kaba (2021, p. 13) describes how the work of abolitionists is often portrayed as ‘unrealistic’ and ‘unworkable,’ making reform seem like a more realistic goal. In relation to the field of child welfare, Roberts (2022) concludes that after decades of researching child protection in the USA and participating in numerous reform efforts, the family-policing system needs to be abolished. She argues that reforms ‘only help to legitimize and strengthen carceral institution,’ which in the case of the family-policing system means that reforms lead to more family policing (ibid., p.284). She draws inspiration from the anti-carceral movement, which has taught her that ‘the criminal punishment system’s repressive outcomes don’t result from any *malfunction*’ (italics in original, Roberts, 2021, p. 463). Prison abolitionists have argued in recent decades that the system is not broken and therefore does not need reform. Instead, it functions ‘as extensions of racist and genocidal policies and practices that seek to criminalize and imprison Indigenous and racialized people’ (see Ware, Ruzsa, & Dias, 2014). In an essay, abolitionist Derecka Purnell (2021b) states that ‘reforms are the master’s tools.’ She invokes the famous quote by Black feminist scholar Audre Lorde (1981, p. 99): ‘For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.’ Purnell sees the carceral system as the master’s house and states that reforms can never bring about profound change because they do not get to the root of the system. Instead, Purnell (2021b, p. 148) argues that abolition is able to dismantle the oppressive system and move towards a more just and humane society ‘where we don’t need master’s houses, master’s tools, or masters at all.’

Many abolitionists argue that the path to abolition can be seen as something that can be achieved gradually. In this respect, Ben-Moshe (2013, p. 86) points out that abolitionists do ‘not necessarily’ regard reform and abolition as ‘binary opposites.’ They

2 For example, adoption scholar Tobias Hübinette (Sweden) has received criticism from various adoption stakeholders for pointing out the colonial and forced character of transnational adoption (see for example, Hübinette, 2011; Schwartz & Schwartz, 2018). Nevertheless, his work made a significant impact on the field of CAS.

plead for understanding reform and abolition as a continuum. Therefore, Roberts (2022, p. 295) considers ‘abolition as a horizon’ and resorts to the concept of *non-reformist reforms* to ‘move us toward that vision.’³ This concept refers to ‘partial abolitions (or reforms) on the road to long-term change’ and has the intention of gradually dismantling and dissolving a system or structure rather than simply improving the existing system, as is the case with traditional reforms (Ben-Moshe, 2013, p. 86). In the field of child welfare, these non-reformist reforms manifest themselves, for example, in proposals to curtail the power of child welfare agencies in regulating and policing vulnerable families (see also Roberts, 2022, pp. 296-297).

An abolitionist approach to transnational adoption starts from the observation that reforms have strengthened the system. Despite the ratification of various international child protection instruments and the revision of adoption legislations, irregularities and abuse still occur in the transnational adoption system (Balk, Frerks, & de Graaf, 2022; Loibl, 2019b). Nevertheless, the reforms are often used by adoption agencies as an argument to proclaim that the current transnational adoption system operates according to ethical principles and is, therefore, free from structural abuse.⁴ In other words, these reforms have strengthened the transnational adoption system by presenting it as a legitimate system. On the other hand, non-reformist reforms have also been proposed to shrink the power of the transnational adoption system. For instance, some of the recommendations of the Flemish Expert Panel on Intercountry Adoption can be seen as non-reformist reforms. Although the Expert Panel did not draw from abolitionist theory, it advocated a paradigm shift towards a passive adoption system to move away from the existing demand-driven system (Expertpanel Interlandelijke Adoptie, 2021). In doing so, the Expert Panel suggested that adoption agencies should no longer be recognised for carrying out transnational adoption procedures and proposed that these procedures be centralised at the FCAA. These non-reformist reforms have the potential to gradually abolish the transnational adoption system (and its power) and enable transformative change that presents us with a different way of caring for children (and their communities) in need.

According to Cullors (2019), the abolitionist project is not only about demolishing oppressive institutions but also about acknowledging the historical damage done to people affected by the system, as well as demanding reparation and restorative justice.

³ The term ‘non-reformist reforms’ was coined by French philosopher André Gorz (1967) and was later applied in abolition literature by Norwegian sociologist Thomas Mathiesen (1974). This term was subsequently picked up again by prison and child welfare abolitionists.

⁴ Adoption agencies and adoption professionals in Flanders and The Netherlands have often referred to reforms to justify the current adoption system and to minimize the reality of adoption abuse. See for example the reaction of the three Flemish adoption agencies (2021, February 9) *Reactie van de drie interlandelijke adoptiediensten n.a.v. het besluit van de Nederlandse Onderzoekscmissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie*.

Family policing abolitionists point out that this includes: the recognition of historical abuse and injustice; truth-finding; individual and collective healing; monetary reparations; assistance in search and reunion; financial compensation for the costs of administrative, legal and psychological counselling, etc. (see e.g.: Albert, Bain, Brico, Dinkins, & Houston, 2021; Burton & Montauban, 2021; Roberts, 2022). In the case of transnational adoption, there is growing academic interest in processes of transitional justice (Loibl, 2021), decolonial healing (Cawayu & De Graeve, 2022) and acts of reparation (H. Kim, 2018), in addition to the proposals for possible reparations made by the government-appointed commissions on transnational adoption (see Commissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie, 2021b; Expertengroep Interlandelijke Adoptie, 2021). An abolitionist approach to transnational adoption could enable these restorative processes and ultimately create a future where care, community, and accountability are central.

2.2 Critical Adoption Studies: State of the Art

This research is situated within what has been called Critical Adoption Studies. This field emerged in the early 2000s when a growing number of researchers in the social sciences and humanities began to examine the sociocultural context and global conditions that shape transnational adoption practices and the experiences of the people involved (e.g., see Anagnost, 2000; De Graeve, 2010; Dorow, 2006; Eng, 2003; Howell, 2006; Hübinette, 2005, 2006; E. Kim, 2010; Park Nelson, 2006; Volkman, 2003; Yngvesson, 2010).⁵ The first sociological and anthropological studies of transnational adoption have focused on how kinship, race and culture are constructed within the adoptive family and have examined the strategies of adoptive parents to deal with the racial difference of their adopted child (see Anagnost, 2000; De Graeve, 2010; Jacobson, 2008; Volkman, 2003). At the same time, other scholars have focused on transnational adoptees by studying their return journeys (E. Kim, 2010; Yngvesson, 2010) or how they negotiate their racial and ethnic identities (Ahluwalia, 2007; Hübinette, 2007). Moreover, some of these initial studies have approached the phenomenon of transnational adoption from a feminist and postcolonial lens. Feminist scholars (Briggs, 2012a; E. Kim, 2010, pp. 26-29) have considered transnational adoption as a form of 'stratified reproduction,' a term introduced by Shellee

⁵ Until the end of the 20th century, adoption research was dominated by studies from psychology and social work that examined the mental health of adoptees and the adjustment of children to the adoptive family, often using a strong quantitative and positivist approach (see E. Kim, 2010, pp. 9-10).

Colen (1995, p. 78), which refers to how historical inequalities of gender, race, ethnicity, class and location structure women's reproductive choices. These feminists have pointed to the unequal reproductive choices between adoptive and first mothers in a North-South setting, at the disadvantage of first mothers' reproductive labour, whose reproductive choices are constrained by structural inequalities. Feminist thinking has not only framed transnational adoption as a reproductive issue but has also played a notable role in shaping further adoption research, in which feminist analytical concepts play a central role in examining the lived experiences of transnational adoption (see for example: De Graeve, 2012; H. Kim, 2016; Zhao, 2012). In addition, some adoption scholars (Ahluwalia, 2007; Eng, 2006; Hübinette, 2007) have drawn on postcolonial frameworks to understand transnational adoption as part of a larger history of forced child separation and colonialism. They believe that transnational adoption is a continuation of former colonial practices to control and civilise non-white children by separating them from their families and communities. They criticise the influx of children from formerly colonised countries in the South and Eastern Europe to the Global North. Their critique has paved the way for new adoption research that addresses colonial legacies in transnational adoption practices and discourses by drawing on postcolonial or decolonial thinking (see Cawayu & De Graeve, 2022; Ivenäs, 2017; L. Quiroz, 2020; Wyver, 2018).

While social scientific studies on adoption increased in the first years after the turn of the millennium, the number of transnational adoptions also increased significantly worldwide. However, the late 2000s saw a sharp decline in transnational adoptions, which continued in the following decade. Demographer Peter Selman (2012, 2020) describes this global phenomenon as 'the rise and fall of intercountry adoption in the 21st century' and explains the decline as a result of fewer available children in popular supply countries (e.g., Russia and China) combined with other factors such as stricter procedures and protocols. Nevertheless, Selman (2020, p. 202) estimates that more than one million children have been adopted transnationally in the last 70 years. Despite the decline in numbers, the field of Critical Adoption Studies has continued to expand over the past decade and has explored new topics of interest. Adoption researchers have begun to look at adoption professionals and how their social and psychological investigations are surrounded by broader discourses of childhood, family and parenting that determine the suitability of prospective adoptive families (Buschmann, 2018; Leinaweaver, Marre, & Frekko, 2017; Mariner, 2017). There have also been several studies that have looked at the market forces of transnational adoption by examining the dynamics of supply and demand (see, for example, Raleigh, 2018; San Román, 2021) and how these 'ethical markets' become legitimised by professionals (van Wichelen, 2019a). More recently, scholars have used transitional and restorative justice frameworks to explore how reparation policies can address the needs and interests of victims of irregular adoption practices (Gesteira, Salvo Agolia, Villalta, & Alfaro Monsalve, 2021; Loibl, 2021).

Since the beginning of Critical Adoption Studies, most investigations have been conducted in adoptive countries in the North, while fewer studies (Bos, 2007; Fonseca, 2006; Johnson, 2004; Leinaweaver, 2008) have focused on countries of origin in the South. Over the last decade, however, this has gradually changed, and adoption research in countries of origin has increased. For example, researchers have started to take more interest in institutions such as children's homes (Disney, 2017; Leinaweaver, 2009; Wang, 2016), maternity homes (H. Kim, 2015) and the larger field of child protection in the context of adoption (Piché, 2021). They investigate the extent to which actors of the child protection system play a role in transforming the orphaned into desirable adoptees. Attention has also been paid to the structural abuse in the transnational adoption system, sometimes perpetrated by private lawyers, adoption professionals and/or government officials working in the field of child protection and adoption (Cardarello, 2009; Cheney, 2021; Hailu, 2017; Meier & Zhang, 2008; Stuy, 2014). In addition, adoption scholars have given consideration to the families of origin, examining their motivations and social circumstances that led to the relinquishment of the child (Högbacka, 2016; Johnson, 2016; H. Kim, 2016; Monico, 2021), including some adoptee researchers who have studied the reunification processes between adoptees and their first families (Clemente Martínez, 2021; Prébin, 2013) and the (re)learning of their heritage languages (Sacré, Cawayu, & Clemente Martínez, 2023). This dissertation attempts to contribute to this growing literature on adoption narratives and practices in countries of origin. In the following sections, I will give an overview of the existing literature on first families and searches in the countries of origin.

2.2.1 First families and child relinquishment

Since the expansion of Critical Adoption Studies, various scholars have drawn attention to the lack of research on first families in the South. For example, anthropologist Signe Howell (2006, p. 15) noted in the mid-2000s that 'very little, or nothing, is known about the biological parents' of children placed in adoptive families in the North. The lack of studies on first families has also perpetuated the rhetoric of transnational adoption as a 'win-win-win situation' (as described in the introduction), as this lack excludes the perspective of first parents who may have a different view. In this regard, anthropologist Kay Ann Johnson (2016, p. 22) notes that documenting the stories of first parents allows us to 'correct' the prevailing discourses constructed by adoptive parents, adoption agencies and competent authorities. The last decade has seen a steady increase in the number of studies on first families, albeit with a geographical focus on countries in Asia (see, for example, for India: Bos, 2007; for Vietnam: Bos, Reysoo, & Dambach, 2015; for Nepal: Clemente Martínez, 2021; for China: Johnson, 2016; for South-Korea: H. Kim, 2016; Prébin, 2013). Few studies have concentrated on the testimonies of the first families in

African countries (for Ethiopia: Gallego Molinero, 2012; for South Africa: Högbäck, 2016) and Latin American countries (for Brazil: Fonseca, 2011; for Guatemala: Monico, 2021). There are thus still a large number of countries of origin whose adoption systems have received little or no scholarly attention, including Bolivia. This study aims to fill this gap. In the following sections, I will briefly overview the existing social scientific literature on first parents, child circulation and child relinquishment in countries of origin.

2.2.1.1 Literature on child circulation and informal adoption

For decades, anthropological studies of kinship have examined informal fosterage and the circulation of children in South America (see for example, Fonseca, 2003; Leinaweaver, 2008; Van Vleet, 2009; Walmsley, 2008; Weismantel, 1995).⁶ Anthropologist Jessaca Leinaweaver (2007, p. 164) understands the ‘circulation of children’ as the ‘relocation of a child or young person into a new household for locally meaningful reasons’. Additionally, she argues that it is ‘likely a very long-standing cultural practice in the Andean region’ and takes place in a context of severe poverty and inequality (ibid.). These studies on informal kinship practices have examined the circumstances and motivations of parents who have shared or surrendered care with family members or others. For example, anthropologist Claudia Fonseca (2003) studied how ‘shared parenthood’ occurred in a Brazilian context in the 1980s and 1990s. She observed that certain mothers in socio-economically precarious circumstances often drew on their social network to find a substitute caregiver to (temporarily) raise the child. Furthermore, in the Peruvian context, Leinaweaver (2007) has observed that these foster practices vary according to socioeconomic differences. This results in some parents being able to choose caregivers in their kin network, while others leave the child with wealthier families, which also creates a hierarchical relationship between the parents and the substitute caregivers. Moreover, anthropologists have pointed out that these forms of informal childrearing do not usually lead to a complete break between the child and the parents of origin but instead favour a more inclusive family model with multiple parents (Fonseca, Marre, & San Román, 2015).

In Bolivia, as in other Latin American countries, the kinship context is influenced by a combination of traditional practices and external influences. Anthropologist Krista Van Vleet (2009) has observed that practices of child circulation are particularly prevalent in indigenous communities in Bolivia. However, in urban areas, it is also common for aunts, uncles, godparents, or grandparents to take children into temporary and informal care (Müller, 2023). Nevertheless, the forces of globalisation, colonialism and modernity have significantly influenced kinship dynamics in Bolivia. In the 20th century, the nuclear

⁶ Also in other continents similar child rearing practices occur, for example in Sub-Saharan Africa (Serra, 2009) and parts of Asia (Bennett, 2018; Carsten, 1991; Trawick, 1992).

family gained prominence in discussions and policies related to childrearing and child protection (Gallien, 2015). Religion has also played an important role in promoting the nuclear family model in Bolivia (Sandvik, 2017). These developments have led to the marginalisation of alternative kinship practices such as child circulation.

In addition to the circulation of children in the Andean region, some anthropologists have also looked at informal adoption practices in various countries in the Global South. For instance, Kay Ann Johnson (2016) studied informal adoptions in the context of China's strict political reproductive regime, which introduced the one-child policy. Her research showed that Chinese parents with one or more children often anonymously relinquished their child to avoid being caught by the authorities. Johnson observed that parents became active actors in determining their child's destination by, for example, leaving the child on the doorstep of an infertile couple who wished to raise a child (see Johnson, 2016, pp. 40-45). This strategy allowed the parents to have peace of mind in knowing their child's whereabouts. Similarly, anthropologist Krista Van Vleet (2009) conducted a study of Quechua families in rural Bolivia and found that parents approached potential substitute parents to take over the care of their child in a context of vital inequality. Both studies emphasise the agency of first parents in informal adoption arrangements and show that they are reluctant to institutional care and state-regulated adoptions.

Furthermore, various adoption scholars (Högbacka, 2016; Leinaweaver, 2007) have criticised the exclusive family ideology that is part of the adoption system and the larger child protection system in countries of origin. Fonseca (2003, p. 118) states that adoption law and policy are 'oriented by nuclear family values' and follow a framework of values and norms that takes the exclusive nuclear family of the Global North as the standard. In the case of state-regulated adoption procedures, this leads to a complete break where the child is no longer part of her first kin network. This could be one reason why some parents opt for informal adoptions or temporary fosterage rather than for formal adoption procedures. Riitta Högbacka (2016) argues that the Northern exclusive family model prevails in the professionalism of child care in Southern countries. She argues that the prevailing Eurocentric approach pushes professionals to marginalise and devalue care situations (such as child circulation) that deviate from the norm in the child protection system (see also Leinaweaver, 2007). Several adoption scholars note that this can lead to families being (unfairly) deprived of the care of the child because local care alternatives are labelled as 'inappropriate' and 'unstable' (see e.g., Fonseca, 2003; Högbacka, 2016; Leinaweaver, 2007). This may result in the child being removed from the family and placed in the child protection system, and eventually, the child may be placed for (transnational) adoption. So far, research has paid little attention to the interaction between first parents and professionals in the child protection system. However, a close analysis of these interactions can help better understand how the child protection system works and whether or not it benefits the families of origin.

2.2.1.2 Literature on first mothers

The limited research on first mothers has provided insights into the broader circumstances and factors that influence child relinquishment. Adoption scholars have identified various factors, such as poverty, social stigma, and the intervention of adoption professionals, that put pressure on first mothers to give up their children for adoption. Several studies have found that the financial situation of first mothers plays a vital role in the relinquishment of the child. In the early 2000s, Roby and Matsumura (2002) found that giving up children for adoption in the Marshall Islands was related to severe poverty and unemployment of first mothers. Recent research by Högbäck (2016) confirms this assumption for South African first mothers. She describes how first mothers told her they felt forced to give up their child for adoption due to economically precarious conditions and (temporary) unemployment, even though most of these mothers wanted to retain care. Högbäck finds this is remarkable in light of the *United Nations Guidelines for Alternative Care of Children* (2010), which state that poverty should not be a reason to remove children from their families. However, several studies show that poverty is one of the main reasons for child relinquishment. These studies also point to the lack of government support and alternative care solutions, with adoption suggested as the only alternative. In addition, scholars have observed that in some countries, first mothers consented to adoption but did not always realise that it involved a permanent severing of ties (see Bos, 2007; Högbäck, 2016; Roby & Matsumura, 2002).

Furthermore, in South Korea and India, the social stigma of premarital pregnancy has also been cited as a reason for placing a child in an adoptive home, although scholars have nuanced this prevailing image of unwed mothers. Huso Kim (2015) reports on first mothers in South Korea between the 1980s and 2000s. She observes how a patriarchal family structure perpetuates the social stigma that pressures mothers to give up their children for adoption. Kim also notes that patriarchal family registration allowed fathers to legally give their child up for adoption without the mother's consent.⁷ In South India, Pien Bos (2007) conducted research in South India and found that the social stigma associated with unwed motherhood affects not only the mother but also her family. However, Bos argues that giving up a child for adoption is not always solely due to premarital pregnancy and its associated stigma. She identifies other factors that may also contribute, such as financial instability or the lack of a support network. Bos notes that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the adoption field often fall back on the 'unwed mother' stereotype to portray the motivations of these mothers. However, the actual reasons are more complex. She observes that the distinction between married and unmarried is not always clear-cut and that cultural understandings of marriage allow

⁷ H. Kim notes that this system was abolished in 2008.

some women to position themselves in the grey zone between the two categories. Nevertheless, Bos (2007, p. 227) found that adoption workers portrayed married mothers as unmarried in adoption papers 'to avoid unwanted interrogation by scrutinizers and to legitimize the relinquishment.'

Adoption scholars have also pointed to the role of adoption professionals in the decision-making process of these mothers as to whether or not to keep the child. Mothers interviewed by Roby and Matsumura (2002) felt pressured by local adoption agency staff to relinquish their child for transnational adoption by touting the benefits it would bring to the child. Kim and Bos also found that in maternity homes and NGOs set up to support pregnant women, mothers felt pressured to give up their children for adoption. Hosu Kim (2015) concludes that maternity homes in South Korea aimed to facilitate adoption rather than invest in family preservation, leaving pregnant women trapped in the adoption system. Bos (2007) researched licensed NGOs in South India that provided shelter and counselling to pregnant women while also being authorised to place children with adoptive families. Her findings were consistent with previous research, as she observed that counselling services were often geared towards promoting adoption rather than exploring other care alternatives. Bos suggests that this may be due, at least in part, to the financial incentives associated with placing children with adoptive families.

Riitta Högbacka (2019) concludes that the adoption system is highly unfair to first mothers. She argues that the adoption system takes children away from impoverished mothers instead of providing the mothers with the care and support they need. Although research on first mothers is growing, little is known about the fathers and other family members who are often also involved in these child relinquishment processes. Consequently, there is still a gap in terms of how first parents and other family members are portrayed in social reports and adoption documents, and whether these official records are consistent with what the family members say.

2.2.2 Search and reunion

Sociological and anthropological research has often focused on how transnational adoptees construct their ethnic and cultural identities and celebrate their origins, but few studies have explored their motivations for initiating a first-family search.⁸ More academic attention has been paid to search and reunion in recent years. In the early 2000s, some scholars began to examine adoptees' first-family searches and explained it as driven by bio-essentialist discourse (see e.g. Homans, 2007; Howell, 2009). For example,

⁸ This is in contrast to the numerous studies on the search motivation of transnational and transracial adoptees in the fields of psychology and social work.

anthropologist and adoptive mother Signe Howell (2003, 2006) believed that adoptees' interest in searching for their biological origins is embedded in biocentric notions of personhood and identity. She even noted that the motives for the search stem from a perceived failure to settle in the adoptive family and country and that adoptees therefore 'seek a solution to their personal problems in the country of their origin and in biological relatives' (2003, p. 481). Recent critical adoption scholarship has pursued a more nuanced interpretation of the search and reunion narratives (Clemente Martínez, 2021; Docan-Morgan, 2014; Prébin, 2013; Salvo Agoglia & Marre, 2019; van Wichelen, 2019b; Wang, Ponte, & Ollen, 2015; Yngvesson, 2010), taking into account transnational adoptees' different motivations for searching (beyond purely essentialist explanations).

The growing attention to first-family searches among transnational adoptees is fuelled by a cultural shift towards more openness about origins (Wang et al., 2015). In their study, Wang and colleagues (2015) explore the motivations for the search through interviews with adoptive parents and their transnational adopted children from China. The study finds that the reasons for searching go beyond bio-essentialist notions of kinship, as both the adoptive parents and adoptees in the study describe their search as a way of seeking truth and coping with emotional loss and that the adoptive parents interviewed often begin their first-family search within a few years of adoption by gathering information and/or hiring a local searcher.

Previous studies have also explored the complexity of reunions in transnational adoptive contexts. For instance, Sara Docan-Morgan (2014) studied the initial interactions between Korean adoptees and their first families. She found that during these interactions, adoptees often asked why they were given up for adoption, after which their first families explained what had happened and asked for forgiveness. In addition, Docan-Morgan found that adoptees in her study tended to speak only positively about their adoption with their first parents and to remain silent about experiences of loss and racism, so as not to make their first families feel guilty. Another study by Chandra Kala Clemente Martínez (2021) on Spanish-Nepali adoption reunions reveals that the reality of reunification does not always correspond to the romanticised image that adoptees often have. Some adoptees pointed to social, cultural, economic, and linguistic differences that make it difficult to connect with their first families and, in some cases, lead to limited future contact. Nevertheless, some adoptees and their first families make efforts to (re)establish kinship ties.

Notably, most studies on search and reunion focus on transnational adoptees from Asia (mainly China and South Korea). The number of studies addressing search and reunion in South America is steadily increasing, but they mainly examine narratives of domestic adoptees limited to countries such as Brazil (Fonseca, 2009), Chile (Salvo Agoglia & Marre, 2019; Yngvesson, 2003) and Argentina (Gesteira, 2015). A recent study considered the accounts of transnational Colombian adoptees in reunion with their first families (Branco, Stella, & Langkush, 2022). However, more research needs to be done on transnational

adoptees' challenges in searching for and reuniting with their first families in South America.

Furthermore, most studies on search and reunion start from the perspective of adoptees and adoptive parents. Studies on first parents' experiences of searching for and finding their transnationally adopted child are scarce, with the exception of Clemente Martínez's study (2022a). She found that in some Nepalese adoption cases, first parents were led to believe their children would be sent to a boarding school in the capital of Nepal. They told Clemente Martínez that after learning that the child had been sent abroad for adoption, they desperately tried to find out where their children were, but without success. Only in a few cases, the first family was able to reunite with their child. Other studies on first mothers have shown that many mothers desire to be reunited with their child, at least at some point in the future (Bos, 2007; Högbäck, 2016). For example, Bos (2007) reports in her study that South Indian first mothers stated that they had no intention to renounce their motherhood but rather surrendered the care of the child for a limited period of time and therefore had an abiding interest in getting to know their child who was given up for adoption. Högbäck (2016) makes similar conclusions in her study on first mothers in South Africa. She found that the majority of mothers in her study wanted to stay in contact with their children or receive frequent information about the child's well-being. She also describes how some adoptive parents had contacted the first mothers of their adoptive children, which in some cases resulted in long-term contact between the two families. While these few studies have given us some insight into the desires and concerns of first parents in a transnational adoptive context, more research is needed, including how search and reunion are experienced in Latin American contexts.

Chapter 3 Methodology

To whom should I write? And how should I write? Should I write against or for something? Sometimes writing turns into fear. I fear writing, for I hardly know if the words I am using are my salvation or dishonor. It seems that everything surrounding me was, and still is, colonialism
— Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories*, p. 35-36.

3.1 Introduction

From the outset of my PhD journey, I was committed to carrying out doctoral research that not only met academic standards but also had a transformative impact on those affected by transnational adoption. In order to achieve this, I ‘delinked’ myself from traditional methodologies and adopted an alternative approach aligned with an activist anthropological methodological framework. As a result, my project is grounded in political and activist landscapes that explore the ‘borderlands’ of social scientific research (McDowall & Ramos, 2018). Throughout my work, I have been attentive to the concerns and issues raised by adoptee communities, focusing particularly on the Bolivian adoptee community. Through my activist stance, I aim to contribute to a transformative research agenda that makes a meaningful difference for those affected by transnational adoption.

This chapter is structured as follows. In the first part, I reflect on my writing process and my positionality as a researcher. I then explain what I mean by ‘searching as a methodology.’ Here I start with how I built on the knowledge production of Bolivian adoptees regarding first-family searches. Next, I go into the anthropological underpinnings and describe the different methods I have used for this study. I also address the collaboration with the research assistants during this study and the ethical procedures followed. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a critical reflection on the terminology used in this dissertation.

3.2 Writing, positionality, and activism

3.2.1 Daring to write

Like Kilomba described in the quote above, writing this dissertation has often filled me with fear. This is partly due to the fact that transnational adoptees who challenge the adoption system and dare to speak critically have been silenced for decades. However, as Trenka, Oparah, and Shin (2006) note, the perception of transnational adoption has gradually changed as adoptees have become more vocal and visible in their adoptive countries since the early 2000s. In Belgium, adoptees have started to organise themselves since 2009.¹ The advocacy and activism by adoptees in Belgium and beyond have played a vital role in shifting the discourse on transnational adoption. This has often occurred in interaction with developments in Critical Adoption Studies and the emergence of feminist, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives in public discourse.

I have identified two mechanisms that attempt to delegitimise the knowledge produced by critical adoptee scholars. These mechanisms have left me unsettled and concerned about the extent to which I could pursue my activist goals in my research. The first mechanism is to discredit adoptees as knowledge producers by presenting them as perpetual children (see also McKee, 2019, p. 125). This idea is prevalent in discourses on transnational adoption and tends to paternalistically cast transnational adoptees as ‘eternal children,’ regardless of their age (Hübinette, 2014, p. 189). The lifelong casting of adoptees as ‘adopted children’ keeps them in a position of subordination, where they are seen as subjects to be educated by adoptive parents, professionals, and policymakers. This has similarities with other processes where white people are seen as educators and saviours of people in the Global South. The second mechanism is to disapprove of critical adoption research that undermines the adoption system by dismissing such studies as unscientific. Individuals or organisations often employ this tactic with a vested interest in perpetuating the existing adoption system (for a more elaborate discussion, see also Withaecx, forthcoming).² I first experienced this dynamic after a two-day symposium on transnational adoption in 2019. As a co-organiser, I was invited to a debriefing at the Flemish Central Authority for Adoption to discuss the symposium with several professionals from adoption agencies. Rather than engaging in a constructive

1 I take the year 2009 as a reference point, insofar as an adoptee-led organisation has begun to raise public awareness of adoption issues, see for example Het Laatste Nieuws (2009, May 29) *Geadopteerd.be wil stem voor geadopteerden zijn*.

2 This mechanism for denouncing academic research extends to other areas of study that challenge the status quo and is therefore not limited to Critical Adoption Studies.

conversation, professionals from adoption agencies dismissed the research findings, labelling the empirical data as ‘outdated,’ ‘not generalisable’ and ‘too biased’ (see also, Cawayu, 2023). Similar strategies were employed in response to the recommendations of the Flemish Expert Panel on Intercountry Adoption in 2021, of which I was a member. This time, however, the criticism did not remain behind closed doors but was voiced in the press, on social media and at political hearings in the Flemish Parliament. The final report and related scientific studies that served as the basis for the Panel’s recommendations were strongly contested and disputed by various parties who disagreed with the findings. For instance, the adoption agencies reacted to the Panel’s recommendations in the press by stating that “the Expert Panel is stuck in the past” (Van Beek in De Standaard, 2021). As a result, some of the research findings were dismissed as irrelevant on the grounds that they were only applicable to the old system. It was also claimed that research conducted by adoptees was biased, and therefore neither the research nor the researcher should be considered in the debate. For instance, during a political hearing, a politician questioned my participation in the Panel. What is more, he also referred to an academic article I had written with my supervisor (see Cawayu & De Graeve, 2022), but in a way that ridiculed and misinterpreted the main argument: “There is an adoption expert added, and just a quick look at his social media and his publications shows that he always talks about adoption as a colonial wound that is still festering” (Parys in Vlaams Parlement, 2021).

Needless to say, these experiences in the highly polarised field of adoption impacted me as an adoptee researcher. Sometimes I felt silenced, sometimes fear prevailed, and I even wondered what the point of this research was if it would be shot down anyway. Nevertheless, these experiences have also strengthened me, especially through the supportive reactions of adoptees, academics, and allies. So I kept writing, remembering the words of Gloria Anzaldúa (1983, p. 171): ‘Writing is the most daring thing I have ever done and the most dangerous. (...) Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals.’

3.2.2 Navigating positionality as an adoptee/diasporic scholar

In recent decades, transnational adoptees have gradually entered the field of adoption, leading to a wave of knowledge production that has enriched literature, research, art and activism (see for example Trenka et al., 2006). Adoptees have actively challenged dominant narratives about transnational adoption by providing counternarratives and assuming the role of ‘knowledge producers’ (see McKee, 2019, p. 82). This shift in perspective has led to numerous books and anthologies written by adoptees. For instance, in 2022, the Network of Bolivian Adoptees released an anthology documenting and highlighting the diversity of experiences and perspectives of Bolivian adoptees (see

Cawayu et al., 2022b). On an academic level, the growing field of Critical Adoption Studies has also provided fertile ground for critical (research) questions. A first generation of scholars directly involved, including adoptees, adoptive parents, and even some first parents, have contributed significantly to the field and paved the way for newer generations of adoptee scholars.

When I first entered the interdisciplinary field of Critical Adoption Studies, I felt welcome and unhindered in carrying out my research. Unlike traditional and positivist social science research, which often insists on maintaining ‘an objective point of view’ (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007, p. 6), critical approaches such as ethnographic, decolonial and feminist scholarship have questioned this ‘zero point epistemology’ (Mignolo, 2009, p. 160). For instance, feminist scholarship uses the concept of ‘strong objectivity’ (Harding, 1987, 1993) to challenge traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality. According to feminist philosopher Sandra Harding (1993, 2015), strong objectivity recognises that knowledge production is socially situated and requires critical reflection on the positionality and interests of the researcher.

According to Kim Park Nelson (2020, p. 21), Critical Adoption Studies ‘foregrounds researcher position in the context of adoption and other communities.’ Therefore, it is essential to reflect on one’s own positionality and how it shapes the research process (Gobo, 2008). In the preface to this dissertation, I have already explained in detail how my positionality as an adoptee, professional and activist influenced the research design. I would like to briefly discuss how my position affected my interactions with the interviewees.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify that due to my personal adoption background and research conducted in my country of origin, the reader might (mis)identify me as a *native anthropologist*. This term refers to anthropologists as insiders ‘who will forward an authentic point of view to the anthropology community’ (Narayan, 1993, p. 676). The use of this term has been critiqued by various anthropologists (Gallinat, 2010; Kuwayama, 2004; Narayan, 1993), as it presents the community under study as a homogeneous group without paying attention to the differences within that group.

As a young male, Bolivian adoptee and researcher who grew up in Belgium, my position has undoubtedly shaped the nature of the interviews and the knowledge gained in this study. I primarily interviewed three key groups during my research: Bolivian adoptees, child welfare and adoption professionals, and first families. Being a Bolivian adoptee, I may be perceived as a community insider when interviewing other Bolivian adoptees. However, I recognise that I belong to this community ‘as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position’ (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 139). In my conversations with child welfare and adoption professionals, I observed their particular interest in my personal adoption story. I also became aware that I was sometimes seen as an example of a successful adoption because of my university studies, social status, and European background. In my contacts with the first families, my personal adoption

experience proved helpful in dispelling any suspicion and building rapport. In some cases, the research assistant and I were mistaken for child protection professionals, but my position as an adoptee helped to clarify our intentions and to build trust.

In addition to my identity as an adoptee researcher, I also consider myself a ‘diasporic researcher’ (Henry, 2007), meaning that I identify as a member of the Bolivian diaspora from the Global North, conducting research in my country of origin. It is essential to reflect on my diasporic position in Bolivia as this presents unique challenges that differ from those of white and non-diasporic colleagues who conduct research in the Global South (see also Behl, 2017; Henry, 2007). During this research, I decided to move to Bolivia for an extended period (from February 2020 to August 2022). As a result, I wrote half of this dissertation in Belgium and the other half in Bolivia. The place where I conducted my research undoubtedly impacted how I reflected on certain events, interviews, conversations, and interactions I had ‘in the field.’ As I lived in Bolivia for several years during this study, it became my home again and gave me a better understanding of this society. My unique position as a researcher from the Bolivian diaspora in Bolivia meant that my presence as a ‘foreign researcher’ was hardly noticeable in academic and research contexts, as I did not stand out racially. For instance, when I worked as a visiting scholar at a Bolivian university, my foreignness was not noticed when I walked through the corridors or attended lectures unless I started speaking and my accent betrayed my European background. My foreignness was not always apparent during my fieldwork. This was an advantage, for example, when I visited remote villages and neighbourhoods where few white strangers passed by.

3.3 Searching as a methodology

3.3.1 Continuing the work of Bolivian adoptees

In November 2017, I had the opportunity to interview Astrid at her home in Belgium, where we talked about her first-family search in Bolivia. She told me that she had been able to locate her family relatively quickly with the help of intermediaries more than a decade earlier. During her search, she spent hours in the public library going through archived newspapers and looking for news articles about the criminal organisation responsible for her abduction and adoption (see also Chapter 4). By analysing the newspaper articles, she gathered extensive information about the criminal gang that had kidnapped her, including the number of child abductions they had committed. She also found details of how her Bolivian parents had testified publicly in the press, hoping to get her back. Astrid had written all this information in a journal, which I was allowed to take

some photos of for later reference. During our conversation, Astrid and I discussed the extent to which I could or should play an active role in first-family searches if I had the ability and knowledge to bring families together. She spontaneously replied: “You have to help where you can.” This conversation with Astrid left a deep impression on me. It inspired me to move beyond the traditional role of anthropologist as an ‘external observer’ and embrace the idea of becoming a ‘co-constructor’ (Gobo, 2008, p. 20).

Several months later, in March 2018, I scheduled an interview with Belen, a Bolivian adoptee from Scandinavia in her thirties who was living in La Paz at the time. During the conversation, Belen told me she conducted first-family searches in Bolivia for other Bolivian adoptees. Her motivation to carry out these searches stemmed from her own experience of the difficulties she had encountered when asking for assistance finding her Bolivian family. Belen told me that in 2010 she had contacted an adoption organisation in her adoptive country for professional support in finding her first family, as she planned to return to Bolivia later that year. To receive support from the organisation, she had to pay a certain amount for their services. Belen felt that her case had a good chance of being solved with the information from her adoption papers (e.g., the full names of her Bolivian parents). However, the organisation could not find any information, and Belen had to travel to Bolivia without any trace. She found communication with this organisation frustrating. In the months between her search request and her planned visit, she had enquired about the current status of the search several times to no avail. She then asked to directly contact the organisation’s Bolivian contact person, but her request was denied. Belen concluded that her experience with this organisation was disappointing, “I didn’t get any information, and I paid a lot of money for the search.” Belen did not give up the search yet, and on her return trip, with the help of a local contact, she managed to find her Bolivian family after all, “After three days, she had found my family.”

In the following years, Belen slowly focused on helping Bolivian adoptees find their first families. Initially, she supported some close Bolivian adoptee friends who also wanted to find their families. After these successful searches, she continued to assist Bolivian adoptees more professionally. Belen also told me that her Bolivian partner helped her in the searches. She expressed how important it was for her not to do these searches alone but with someone from Bolivia who was more familiar with the social, cultural and institutional realities.

When I met Belen in La Paz in 2018, we quickly became good friends and we often talked about the different search cases she worked on. Knowing that I was interested in first families, Belen was happy to share her approach to finding first families with me. She explained to me the different steps she followed when taking on a new search case. Belen had even redefined her process over time and created a logbook to document each step of the search. She considered this logbook an essential document as it could be shared with adoptees in case no family members could be found. This was in marked contrast to

the adoption organisation, which provided little to no information about its search methods.

Belen's search practice was a great inspiration to me as I saw how she, as a Bolivian adoptee, made a significant difference in the lives of Bolivian adoptees and their Bolivian families. Her commitment convinced me to use my acquired knowledge and skills and play an active role in first-family searches. Later that year, I embarked on my first search case for a Bolivian adoptee based in Germany. For some time, the adoptee expressed her desire and curiosity to find her Bolivian family. She told me some information about her Bolivian mother was in her adoption papers, including her full name. I suggested I could take a look and ask for more information through the contacts I had met through this study. Eventually, one of my contacts managed to get a lead on where the mother would presumably live. With this new information, I proposed to travel to the place together with a Bolivian research assistant, Kantu (see also section 3.3.2.4). When we arrived in a village in northern Bolivia, we went to the indicated area where the mother would live. Since we did not have an exact address, we were forced to ask around among the inhabitants. On our first day, we knocked from door to door, but unfortunately, without success. We reconsidered our search strategy and put up posters in the neighbourhood. I had learnt from Belen to be very careful when publicly sharing information about the mother. We were often asked why we were looking for this person. Without divulging any information, Kantu and I posed as distant relatives looking for their long-lost family member. After several days of searching, we returned to La Paz empty-handed. A week later, to our surprise, we received a phone call from a woman who said she was the mother we were searching for.

This first search, and the others that were to follow, showed me the complex and touching stories of the first parents and relatives. First-family searches also enabled me to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the adoption was carried out through the different stages of the search process. This has led me to reflect on how these searches have also methodologically contributed to this dissertation and the development of 'searching as methodology,' which I use as a framework.

3.3.2 An activist approach

3.3.2.1 Anthropological underpinnings

Supporting adoptees in their search for their first families was a way for me to take an activist stance towards the politics of transnational adoption, which in Bolivia and beyond in Latin America is largely surrounded by a culture of secrecy and the clean-break principle that discourages open adoptions and offers little to no opportunity to actively search for the family of origin. Searching has been not merely a method or technique for me but also has methodological, philosophical, and epistemological implications. To

clarify, as method and methodology are often conflated, method refers to specific techniques and procedures for data collection, while methodology concerns the entire approach and is informed by conceptual, theoretical, and ethical viewpoints on knowledge production (Gobo, 2008; Harrison, 2007). Therefore, I consider searching as a methodology based on an activist approach in anthropology and ethnography.

In recent decades, various anthropologists have pointed to the premise of engaged anthropology to bring engagement into the centre of the discipline (see for example, Lamphere, 2004; Low & Merry, 2010; Rappaport, 1993; Sanford & Angel-Ajani, 2006). Anthropologists Low and Merry (2010) have classified various forms of anthropological engagement, with activist anthropology closely aligning with my approach of combining first-family searches with ethnographic research on Bolivian adoption. Various anthropologists contend that the premise of this activist anthropology is a commitment to social change and human liberation (Alonso Bejarano, López Juárez, Mijangos García, & Goldstein, 2019; D.-A. Davis & Craven, 2023; Speed, 2006). Martínez (2008, p. 191) argues that ‘reciprocity guides the activist anthropological partnership’ and is, therefore, a central element. Speed (2006, p. 215), in turn, indicates that activist anthropology is characterised by ‘the overt commitment to an engagement with our research subjects that is directed toward a shared political goal.’ Alonso Bejarano and colleagues (2019, p. 6) build on this activist scholarship as they believe that anthropology is more ‘than just interpret the lives of others’ while ‘building their careers by fueling the academic machine.’ Instead, they believe that ‘political and scholarly activity joined together can be mutually productive for both researcher and researched’ (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019, p. 35). With this in mind, my research can be placed within activist anthropology, given the critical role played by the Bolivian adoptee community in exchanging knowledge, reflections, and doubts.

With proposing *searching as a methodology* in anthropological and adoption research, I do not want to pretend to be the first who critically engages with searching as a methodological framework. While I am aware that engaged scholars play an essential role in our world by providing advice, guidance, and advocacy (Low & Merry, 2010), there are few examples in transnational adoption research where searches have been a central methodological approach to conducting research. Perhaps most similar to my research is the study by anthropologist Chandra Kala Clemente Martínez (2022a), who worked closely with the Spanish-Nepalese adoptee community and assisted several adoptees and first families in their searches for each other. In her study, Clemente Martínez (2022a, p. 9) writes how she took on the ‘triple role of researcher, mediator, and adopted person’ and how this contributed positively to her study with its necessary challenges and ethical considerations. She also reflects on the importance to ‘engage in a reciprocal relationship’ with both adoptees and first families rather than just studying them (ibid.). Historian Gonda Van Steen (2019) has also worked with the Greek adoptee community in her research on Greek adoption. She reflects that her study ‘reconstructs the quest for

knowledge, which is, after all, the common drive among “my adoptees,” my readers, and myself’ (Van Steen, 2019, p. xviii). In her study, she explores the origin stories of Greek adoptees who have asked her for assistance deciphering their adoption papers and Greek family history. Van Steen (2019, p. xx) is also guided by her conviction to use her skills and knowledge in assisting Greek adoptees in their search quests, as she reflects: ‘How can one possibly remain a distant researcher when given the opportunity to touch lives?’

3.3.2.2 The ethnographic value of searches

The first-family searches contributed significantly to the ethnographic value of my research on child protection and adoption. The chosen methodological approach enabled me to gain insights that I would not have been able to obtain using conventional research techniques.

Through the searches, I had the privilege of meeting various first families from whom I gained a comprehensive understanding of their family dynamics and their social and economic situation. During the online and offline reunions, I had the opportunity to witness many intimate moments between the first family and the adoptee. These interactions gave me insight into the diverse ways and factors through which parents had lost their child(ren) or given them up for adoption. As these interactions occurred within the context of search and reunion, I also enquired whether the first families had previously attempted to search for their children.

I was also given access to the adoption records of 20 Bolivian adoptees. This gave me valuable insights into a child's institutional journey in the child protection system before being placed for adoption. These documents also offered me a glimpse into the content of a typical adoption record. Here I saw significant differences between the adoption records from the 1980s and 1990s, where little information was documented, and the records from the 2000s and 2010s, which contained more reports and files, often including information about the Bolivian family. By reviewing numerous social reports written by various social workers from different children's homes, I gained insight into the efforts made to reintegrate the child into the family and the observations of the professionals involved.

Further, the searches I was involved in also helped me to grasp better the desires and motivations of the Bolivian adoptees who wanted to find their Bolivian families. Some adoptees, or their adoptive parents, reported attempts to initiate a search through official channels such as adoption agencies or central authorities, but often without success. Through my involvement in the first-family searches, I witnessed the challenges faced by Bolivian adoptees who did not have the means and/or time to travel to Bolivia to begin their search. I also observed how difficult it was for Bolivian adoptees to contact local organisations, hospitals, and children's homes because of the difficulties in reaching

them, language barriers and cultural differences in approaching and communicating with these institutions.

The first-family searches have contributed significantly to this study in ways I never imagined at the start of this project. Conducting the searches brought me different insights and knowledge corresponding to my research questions.

3.3.2.3 Access to the field and research methods

This study was conducted from November 2017 to May 2022 in various locations in Europe and Bolivia, with much of the fieldwork and interviews taking place in Bolivia. For this study, I focused on three groups of key participants: Bolivian adoptees, child welfare and adoption professionals, and first families. By including all three perspectives, I better understood the diverse contexts and discourses in the child protection and transnational adoption system on issues such as child relinquishment, child removal, family reintegration, termination of parental rights, search for origins, return visits, etc. For this study, I relied on participatory methods, analysis of adoption records and interviews. In Bolivia, I worked with research assistants to carry out parts of the research (see next section).

In the first phase of my fieldwork in Bolivia, I began with participant observation in a children's home in La Paz from July 2018 to December 2018. I had lived in this children's home before my adoption and visited it several times in the years leading up to this study. Because of my personal connection to the children's home, I was able to secure permission from the home's directive board to conduct participant observation there. As a volunteer, I participated in the daily routines of the children's home. Although the children's home accommodates children and adolescents aged zero to eighteen, I was mainly involved with children aged zero to six. I assisted the childcare workers by feeding the babies and children during lunchtime and playing with the toddlers during their playtime. I visited the children's home every morning for the first two months and gradually reduced my visits to twice a week by the end of my six-month stay. During my time at the children's home, I observed the crucial moments of a child's stay: entering the children's home, being introduced to the adoptive parents, leaving the home with the adoptive parents, and the occasional visits from the adoptive families. Each time I returned from the home, I made notes of my observations, thoughts, and remarks in my fieldwork diary.

In the second phase of my fieldwork, I became involved in first-family searches. While the first searches happened in 2018, the majority of the searches took place between December 2020 and May 2022. In total, I received 15 search requests from 20 Bolivian adoptees, some of whom were siblings. This required 14 fieldwork trips to different cities

and villages in the departments of La Paz, Cochabamba, Pando, and Santa Cruz.³ The actual trip usually took two to four days to find and meet the family, but it also required preliminary investigations that could take several months. The on-site search could only begin once sufficient information about the first family had been gathered. Of the 20 Bolivian adoptees, 16 identified themselves as female and four as male. In addition, four of them were born in the 1980s, four in the 1990s, and 12 in the 2000s. Of the 20 adoptees, 17 had requested to search for their Bolivian families, of whom 13 were eventually reunited with their families.⁴ Three of the 20 adoptees had already made virtual contact with their Bolivian families but asked me to arrange an interview with their relatives to better understand their origin story. The majority of adoptees (15) I met during the search, only five adoptees I knew before. A large proportion (13) of these adoptees were adopted to the Netherlands. I focused in particular on adoptions from Bolivia to the Netherlands as these adoptions were carried out through a Dutch adoption agency (*Nederlandse Adoptie Stichting*) in the 2000s and 2010s. I made contact with Dutch adoptive families who had adopted from Bolivia by joining their Facebook group and attending some of their annual meetings in the Netherlands. At these meetings and on social media, I introduced myself as an adoptee researcher and explained that I was doing research on first-family searches. This led to several search requests from adoptive parents on behalf of their children, who were between 10 and 22 years old. To prepare and conduct the first-family searches, I had numerous conversations with 14 adoptive parents, often in the presence of the adoptee. In preparation for the first-family searches, I was provided with the adoption records of all the adoptees concerned. This enabled me to analyse hundreds of pages of adoption documents and reports. In reading the files, I focused on examining the institutional path of each child and paid particular attention to the portrayals of the first families as documented by the professionals.

In addition to the searches, I conducted interviews with the three groups of participants. The first group concerned Bolivian adoptees. My involvement in the Bolivian adoptee community enabled me to connect with a large number of Bolivian adoptees all over the world.⁵ For this study, I interviewed 26 Bolivian adoptees living in various countries, including Belgium (12), Spain (2), Sweden (3), Italy (2), Germany (2), the

3 Only in one case was the search conducted virtually via social media, as the COVID-19 situation did not allow travel outside Bolivia, where the family lived. In this dissertation, the name “Santa Cruz” specifically refers to the department of Santa Cruz, while “Santa Cruz de la Sierra” refers to the capital city of the department.

4 In three cases, there was too little information to initiate a search, and in one case, the suspected mother was found, but she denied any involvement.

5 Since my first return trip to Bolivia in 2013, I have come into contact with several Bolivian adoptees living in Belgium. I knew most of them from the Bolivian gatherings that our adoptive parents organised every year during our childhood (see also chapter 7). In 2015, I had written an essay about my own search in Bolivia, which put me in touch with several Bolivian adoptees in other countries. In 2016 I met Vicente Mollestad, with whom I co-founded *Network of Bolivian Adoptees*.

Netherlands (3), United States (2), Norway (1) and France (2).⁶ The interviews were conducted in Dutch, English and Spanish, and covered various themes, including belonging to an adoptee community, racialisation and discrimination, return trips to Bolivia and visits to children's homes, and search and reunion. The interviews lasted between one hour and three hours. Some interviews were conducted in person, and others through video calls. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. In addition to these interviews, I also had many online and offline informal conversations with numerous Bolivian adoptees.

The second group comprised professionals in the field of child protection and adoption. I interviewed a total of 25 professionals. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted between 30 minutes to three hours. The first type of professionals I interviewed were those working in the local child protection services and non-governmental organisations in Bolivia. When I was invited to give a guest lecture at a Bolivian university, I spoke to an audience of mainly child welfare professionals. Following the lecture, I got the contact details of some of these professionals, who then agreed to be interviewed for my research. This led to a snowball effect, as I subsequently came into contact with some of their colleagues who were also willing to be interviewed. I interviewed 13 professionals, mainly social workers, psychologists, and legal counsellors. These interviews focused on various topics, including child relinquishment and abandonment, families of origin, social investigations, family reintegration, and the role of professionals and their organisations in contributing to the child protection system. A second type of professional were employees of various children's homes in Bolivia. I conducted interviews with eight professionals working in children's homes in La Paz (two interviews), El Alto (two interviews), Cochabamba (three interviews) and Montero (one interview). I chose these children's homes because they were familiar with transnational adoption procedures. During my stay in Bolivia, I visited some of these children's homes more than once, for example, when I accompanied some Bolivian adoptees on their visits to their children's homes. The interviews covered similar topics to those of the first type of child welfare professionals but focused on the context of the children's home. Questions were also asked about the preparation of children for (transnational) adoption and the children's home policy on returning Bolivian adoptees regarding access to adoption records. Thirdly, I interviewed four adoption intermediaries who facilitated transnational adoptions of Bolivian children to various countries in Europe and North America (see also Chapter 4). The interviews covered topics such as how they started working in adoption, developments and changes in adoption policy,

⁶ Of the interviews with Bolivian adoptees, seven interviews were conducted in 2016 as part of a master's thesis on Bolivian adoption in Belgium.

their role as local representatives, and their relationship with adoptive families and adoptees.

Finally, because of the searches, I met 11 Bolivian families and had in-depth conversations/interviews with 18 first parents and relatives. All conversations were conducted in Spanish, as this was the primary language of communication. When meeting with the families, I introduced myself as an adoptee and a researcher. I explained to the families that because of my adoption background and involvement in the adoptee community, I was in touch with numerous Bolivian adoptees, including the one who had asked me to search. With their permission, I audio-recorded our conversations and interviews, which lasted between one and three hours. The recordings gave me valuable insights into the families' perspectives on the adoption process. The families shared details of how the child was placed for transnational adoption, as well as their interactions with the professionals and intermediaries involved in the process. These conversations also incorporated the various questions from the adoptees that had been sent to me in advance. During these meetings, many virtual reunions were also facilitated between the adoptees and their first family members, where I took on the role of translator.

3.3.2.4 Research assistants

Research assistants can sometimes take on an invisible role in anthropological research, despite their important contribution to knowledge production (Gupta, 2014; Turner, 2010). In this study, the role of the research assistant was also crucial, especially in carrying out the first-family searches. As a researcher employed by an institution in the Global North, it is essential to reflect on my relationship with the research assistants who also contributed to this study in this section.

During my fieldwork, I quickly realised that my position as a male researcher and non-native speaker from the Global North brought certain limitations. Although I felt confident speaking Spanish in informal settings, working in a professional Spanish-speaking environment was new to me. This required familiarising myself with child protection jargon, formal protocols and courtesies. Therefore, I decided to work with research assistants who could accompany me during my first round of interviews and later during the first-family searches. For this study, I collaborated with four research assistants: Mayerlin (2018, 2020-2022), Sergio (2018), Kantu (2018), and Pamela (2021). Mayerlin, Sergio and Kantu were students at the public university (UMSA) of La Paz. They had prior training in qualitative techniques, while Pamela had professional experience with Bolivia's child protection and adoption system. I ensured fair compensation for all four research assistants, considering possible power imbalances and economic inequalities.

In 2018, during my interviews with child welfare professionals, I worked with Mayerlin, Sergio, and Kantu, who substituted for each other due to scheduling conflicts and other commitments. Nonetheless, they offered me invaluable support in navigating the different minibuses required to reach far-flung neighbourhoods and reflecting on the interviews during our journey home. Kantu also accompanied me on the first search that year. Later, I consistently worked with Mayerlin and Pamela on subsequent first-family searches (2020-2022).⁷ As a male researcher, I recognised the potential challenges of my gender and wanted to ensure that all family members felt comfortable talking to us. To achieve this, I worked with a female research assistant during the searches. This combination of a male and a female (re)searcher allowed us to build trust with all family members, including female relatives who may felt more comfortable speaking with a researcher of the same gender. In these situations, I encouraged the research assistant to take the lead in conversations with female participants, as this helped establish a comfortable and trusting environment for everyone involved. In addition, during the first-family searches, it was essential to have regular reflection sessions before, during and after the search process, as the stories were often compelling. During these sessions, the research assistant played an important role in validating the interpretations of the family stories and placing them in the socio-cultural Bolivian context. These discussions also allowed us to share insights and knowledge from the search process. I also made sure to inform adoptees (and their adoptive parents) that the first-family searches were conducted with the help of a research assistant. Their involvement in the search process was always explained in detail.

3.3.2.5 Limitations

In the course of this doctoral study, an extensive amount of data was collected over the course of six years. However, due to the sheer volume of data gathered, it was not possible to include all of it in this dissertation. Therefore, strategic decisions had to be made about which data to present in the empirical chapters.

Given the limited research on adoption in Bolivia, it was essential for me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Bolivian child protection and adoption system. As a result, I conducted interviews with a number of different professionals from various organisations and institutions in Bolivia and did an ethnography in a children's home. Due to the nature of the research questions, I chose to give priority in the empirical chapters to the accounts of the first families and the Bolivian adoptees. This resulted in the sporadic inclusion of interviews with Bolivian child welfare professionals and the omission of the ethnographic research in the children's home.

⁷ The only first-family search I did alone was a search to find Tomás, as described in Chapter 6, section 6.2.

Furthermore, I also drew on abolitionist, feminist, and decolonial thinking in this dissertation. This allowed me to explore how global inequalities, colonial and patriarchal legacies have influenced the development of dominant discourses and ideologies in adoption and child welfare practices. The application of this holistic approach may have led to less attention being paid to other axes of difference when discussing the data. While I have been attentive to the intersections of race, gender, and class in the analysis of the interviews, I am aware that this could potentially be explored further in some of the empirical sections, particularly in relation to first families. As research on first families is limited and these studies mainly focus on first mothers (see Chapter 2, 2.2.1.2), future research on first families could further explore the gender dynamics between first mothers and first fathers in relation to child relinquishment, search and reunion.

3.4 Research ethics

I am well aware that investigating and writing about the personal and intimate stories reflected in the testimonies and adoption records presents some ethical challenges. This has also been noted by the foundation that funded my research, which has asked me to seek ethical approval. The research project was ethically approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy at Ghent University prior to my fieldwork in Bolivia. In preparing my ethical self-assessment, I was guided by the ethical guidelines of the American Anthropological Association (AAA).

As part of my commitment to transparency and ethical research practices, I made sure to introduce myself as a researcher in my encounters with potential participants. I clearly communicated this study's aims, objectives, methods, and ethical protocols to foster trust and understanding between myself and the participants. In the case of first-family searches, I gave the adoptees (and their adoptive families) an information document with all the information about the doctoral study and the legal framework for searches in Bolivia (see Appendix). I also informed the first families that the searches were part of an academic study and had no lucrative purpose. This was important because some relatives enquired whether I was being paid for the search or whether they should pay me. To address their concerns, I verbally explained the aims and ethical protocols of the study. This was because forms and paperwork were often viewed with scepticism, especially in cases where family members had been coerced or pressured into signing declarations terminating their parental rights. In this way, I wanted to ensure that all participants felt comfortable and fully informed so that they could make informed decisions about their participation in the study. I also promised the participants that any information obtained through the interviews and/or adoption documents would be kept confidential, and their

identities would not be revealed unless otherwise stated. Before starting an interview, I explained to the participants that they could interrupt or end the interview anytime. Transcriptions and audio files were stored securely in a password-protected digital repository.

In addition, I always talked to participating adoptees (and their adoptive families) about the potential implications of reunions. In these conversations, I emphasised the importance of seeking psychological support or having a support network to fall back on if needed. In case a possible family was found, I also suggested the option of a DNA test to confirm the genetic relationship. I also asked the adoptees and adoptive families if I could pass their contact details to the first family when requested. Similarly, I asked the Bolivian families how they felt about being found and whether they wanted to engage in a reunion, which all families were positive about. During the conversations with the families, the research assistant and I explained that we would be available anytime if further questions or additional support were needed. We kept in touch with several first families in the weeks and months following our initial encounter to answer further questions. However, most first families and adoptees preferred to continue developing their relationship privately.

Throughout the writing process of the empirical chapters, I have endeavoured to respect the participants' privacy as much as possible and to keep my promise of anonymity. I replaced their names with pseudonyms, omitted details of specific locations, and sometimes changed the gender of the children when this did not seem essential to the argument. As for the pseudonyms, I have replaced the original names with pseudonyms that reflect the ethnic character of the original name.

3.5 Note on terminology

In this final part of this chapter, I would like to discuss the terminology used in this dissertation briefly. I draw inspiration from various scholars in the field of adoption and child welfare who have been influential in challenging and replacing the prevailing jargon. As described in Chapter 2, child welfare abolitionists opt for the term *family-policy system* to emphasise the policing and punitive nature of the system. Abolitionist scholar Erica Meiners points out that 'avoiding the state's language is a key tool for practitioners of reform and abolition' (Meiners in Williams, 2020). Adoption scholar Clapton (2018, pp. 122, 126) argues that 'language is never neutral' but 'carries profound implications and assumptions.' Rather than blindly adopting a particular terminology, I believe it is crucial to think critically about the terms commonly used. Therefore, this section invites collective reflection on language rather than proposing a 'correct' terminology.

In Critical Adoption Studies, the use of the term *birth mother* — and by extension *birth parents* and *birth families* — has been challenged by adoption scholars (Högbacka, 2014, 2016; Myers, 2014). According to Myers (2014, p. 5), the term reduces women to the act of childbearing and portrays them as ‘breeders.’ Similarly, Högbacka (2016, p. 4) criticises that the term birth mother only refers to women ‘whose children are adopted and not to all women who give birth.’ This term also implies that others become parents, centring the perspective of the Global North. Högbacka (2016) notes that the frequently used term *biological mother* is also problematic, claiming that ‘all mothering is arguably biological, in other words it involves physical and bodily processes.’ Instead, she prefers to use the term *first mother* to describe women whose children have been placed for adoption. This term refers only to the order in which people assume motherhood and avoids essentialising or hierarchising parenthood.

Another contested term is *receiving country*. Wyver (2017) argues that this term removes agency from countries on the demand side in transnational adoption. He suggests instead using *demand and supply countries* better to reflect the demand-driven nature of the transnational adoption system. In this dissertation, I will interchange demand and supply countries with other terms, such as *adoptive country* and *country of origin*.

Next, I deliberately use the term *children’s home* instead of *orphanage* because most children have living parents and are therefore not technically *orphans* (Cheney & Rotabi, 2014), which would misrepresent the family status of children living in these homes.

Then there is the term *adoption* I want to reflect on. Various adoptee scholars and activists have criticised the term over time because, in their view, it ‘negates any agency for the one who is object of the adopter’ (Trenka et al., 2006, p. 15). So I have started to look at the dictionary definitions of the verb *to adopt*:

To take by choice into a relationship; to take a child of other parents legally as your own child; to take up as someone's own; to take voluntarily (a child of other parents) as one's own child especially in compliance with formal legal procedures. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

To legally take another person's child into your own family and take care of him or her as your own child. (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)

Legally take (another's child) and bring it up as one's own. (Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.)

All three dictionary descriptions use the word *take*, emphasising the perspective of those who take rather than that of the ‘taken’ child or those whose child ‘is taken.’ This term thus centres the actors’ point of view on the demand side of the equation. Furthermore, the term has been criticised for its Eurocentric roots and for reflecting an institutionalised practice based on exclusive notions of parenthood and family prevalent

in the Global North (Högbacka, 2016). Despite the criticism, the term is still widely used in everyday, professional, and academic settings due to the lack of a suitable alternative. In Critical Adoption Studies, scholars often use the term *transnational adoption* instead of *intercountry adoption*, which is mainly used in adoption law and policy. Scholars have argued that the adjective ‘intercountry’ falsely suggests an equal exchange of children between countries, whereas in reality this exchange is rather one-sided (Högbacka, 2016; E. Kim, 2010; Wekker, Åsberg, van der Tuin, & Frederiks, 2007). Therefore, the term transnational adoption is more appropriate as it better reflects the global asymmetries underlying the transnational exchange of children. In this dissertation, I use the term *transnational adoption system* to illustrate how this practice is embedded in (trans)national systems and institutions. However, in the search for more accurate and appropriate terms, I am also in favour of popularising the term *child-taking system*, recently introduced by Briggs (2021). While Briggs did not define the term, it is consistent with the notion of adoption as the act of taking children away.

Chapter 4 First families in search of their children: The extraction of children in times of irregularity

4.1 Introduction

In this first empirical chapter, I address the impact of irregular adoption on first families in Bolivia. Since the beginning of transnational adoption in Latin America in the 1970s, only a few studies have centralised the voices of these families. Nonetheless, it is of utmost importance to document and theorise about first families' experiences to 'challenge the global system and the image that the Western world has of them' (Clemente Martínez, 2022a, p. 14). First families — and first mothers in particular — are often referred to as the 'subaltern' in adoption studies, in the meaning of Spivak (1988). In her influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1988), Spivak critically analyses how Northern knowledge production often misrepresents and silences 'third-world subjects.' She argues that scholars who rely solely on Northern scholarship fail to fully understand the complexities of the struggles and resistance of these subaltern subjects. Spivak emphasises the importance of acknowledging the agency of the subaltern in scholarship as they are not passive recipients of domination but exercise their own forms of resistance, which are often invisible in the dominant discourse. As a diasporic scholar trained in the Global North, I attempt to follow Spivak's call by focusing on how first families exercise agency despite prevailing adoption narratives in which they are often depicted as victims. Therefore, I am interested in what extent and under which conditions first families can exceed their perceived subalternity. I draw on various conversations and interviews I have conducted with Bolivian first parents in which I look at how they searched for their children as a lens to scrutinise their struggles and resistance. I focus, in particular, on the stories of Bolivian families who lost their children to transnational adoption circuits, which were characterised by irregularities and illegality in the 1980s.

Their accounts shed light on how they were able to exercise agency and express different forms of resistance under various vicious circumstances.

I am inspired by the work of anthropologists Chivalán Carillo and Possoco (2020). They emphasise the extractive nature of transnational adoption and argue that modern extractions of territory, bodies and substance are a ‘manifestation of colonial practices, but are also tied to strategies of resistance to colonial machines’ (2020, p. 514). They then explain that ‘practices of extraction and practices of resistance intersect and become intertwined’ (ibid., p.520). In this chapter, I attempt to further explore this relationship between ‘extraction’ and ‘resistance’ in the context of transnational adoption. Drawing on Fieweger, who recognised the extractive and colonial nature of transnational adoption as early as the early 1990s, saying that ‘Latin American children have become another natural resource in demand in the developed world’ (Fieweger, 1991, p. 290), I want to explore how extractive adoption practices have taken place in the transnational adoption system in Bolivia and the extent to which the (lack of) laws have facilitated this. However, I do not leave it at pointing out the practices of extraction but also look at the processes of ‘re-existence.’ Mignolo (2017, p. 41) indicates that ‘re-existing is something other than resisting’ and argues that ‘if you resist, you are trapped in the rules of the game others created.’ According to Mignolo (2017, p. 45), re-existing implies delinking from that game and ‘relink with their own memories and legacies, thereby securing modes of existence that satisfy them.’ Although the first families did not use this concept themselves, the concept captures their efforts to ‘relink’ with the adoptee. In this chapter, I explore how first families employ practices of resistance and re-existence. Resistance refers to various strategies for exerting agency within the transnational adoption system (‘the game others created’). At the same time, acts of re-existence point to how first families seek to re-establish a connection with their adopted child.

In this chapter, I rely mainly on the testimonies of the first families, supplemented by some interviews with local representatives who told me more about the context of irregular adoptions and the developments towards a coherent transnational adoption system.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part outlines the development of Bolivia’s child protection and adoption system in response to the emergence of irregular adoptions. In the second part, I look at the impact of irregular adoption on first families in the past and the strategies they used at the time to find their children. In the final part, I look at present-day searches by first families in the current child protection system.

4.2 Between irregularity and regulation

In this first part, I examine how a limited legal adoption framework supported the extractive nature of transnational adoption. I mainly focus on ‘irregular adoptions,’ which took place within the laws of the child protection system and are thus considered ‘legal adoptions.’ They are different from ‘illegal adoptions,’ which are carried out outside the law. In the first section, I describe the development of the transnational adoption system by looking at the various laws introduced from the 1960s onwards. The second section draws on the accounts of local representatives about their experiences of irregularities in transnational adoption procedures.

4.2.1 The development of a transnational adoption system in Bolivia

The Bolivian child protection system as we know it today has a long history marked by numerous reforms and the emergence of international child protection instruments (Escobari de Querejazu, 2020; Iño Daza, 2017). Various Bolivian historians have pointed to the development of the modern child protection system in Bolivia in the early 20th century (Escobari de Querejazu, 2009, 2020; Iño Daza, 2017; Kirigin, 2011). However, research on the historiography of the Bolivian child protection system is limited and requires more scholarly attention. In this section, I offer a brief overview of certain milestones in the development of Bolivian child protection that can provide some perspective on the existence of irregular adoptions and the call for more stringent reforms.

In 1966, the first Minor’s Code (*Código del Menor*) saw the light of day under the military government of Alfredo Ovando Candia.¹ This new legislation led to the creation of the National Council for Minors (*Consejo Nacional del Menor, CONAME*), which at that time was the only body responsible for planning and implementing the policy of integral protection of minors (Hurtado Gomes, 2003). Subsequently, the Guardianship Courts for Juveniles (*Tribunales Tutelares de Menores*) were also established as specialised courts to handle cases of children and adolescents in need of protection or intervention (Kirigin, 2011). From then on, one had to turn to these institutions to carry out an adoption legally. Due to the limited regulations regarding adoption, no distinction was yet made between domestic and foreign adoption, nor between simple and plenary adoption. Historian Escobari de Querejazu (2020, p. 118) considers this a breakthrough in the legal procedures

¹ Código del Menor, D.S. No 07760 from 12 April 1966.

for adopting children but notes that the administrative process was slow, bureaucratic, and corrupt. Escobari de Querejazu (2020, p. 123) writes that when the Minor's Code was revised in 1971, CONAME presented a proposal to include an Adoption Code (*Código de Adopciones*) in the Minor's Code, but it was later rejected. Instead, the Family Code of 1972 contained a more elaborate legal framework for adoption.² From 1976 onwards, a second Minors' Code appeared, further regulating adoption in more detail but still did not distinguish between national and transnational adoption procedures.³

At the same time, in the 1970s, transnational adoption from Latin America began to develop and increased steadily in the subsequent years (Pilotti, 1985; Selman, 2009). Adoption to the Global North increased from the 1980s onwards, and by the end of the decade, Latin America was about to become the world's leading sending region according to Kane (1993). At that time, as Goldschmidt (1986, p. 257) stated, many prospective parents from Europe and North America 'turned to Latin America in their search for children' as it became an important supplier of adopted children to the Global North due to the decline in transnational adoptions from Asia in the second half of the 1970s (Pilotti, 1985). Due to this 'unprecedented surge in the demand,' many Latin American countries lacked orderly laws and policies to regulate and supervise transnational adoption (Pilotti, 1985, p. 30). As a result, the number of events reported in the press about irregular adoptions, lucrative black markets operations and abductions of children for the purpose of transnational adoption, and the placement of children with unqualified adoptive parents, had increased significantly during this period in Latin America, including Bolivia (Pilotti, 1985). Despite scholarly attention given to the historical, social and political contexts that influenced the illegal adoption and child appropriation in various South American countries, such as Argentina (Arditti, 1999; Villalta, 2006a), Chile (Alfaro Monsalve & Morales, 2021), Colombia (Branco, 2021), Ecuador (Fieweger, 1991; Leifsen, 2008) and Guatemala (Monico, 2021; Rotabi & Bromfield, 2017), very little research has been conducted on this topic in the Bolivian context.

In the 1970s, most Latin American countries had little or no legislation regulating transnational adoption, although some attempts were made towards the end of the decade to streamline transnational adoption procedures. Goldschmidt (1986) described that starting in 1979 — not coincidentally the International Year of the Child — various meetings were organised to discuss possible scenarios for better regulation of (transnational) adoption procedures. According to Goldschmidt, these initiatives paved the way for developing an international protection instrument. The proposed recommendations were further advanced at the 1983 Meeting of Adoption Experts in Quito, organised by the Inter-American Children's Institute of the Organization of

2 Código de Familia, D.S. No 10426 from 23 August 1972.

3 Código del Menor, Law No. 12538 from 30 May 1975.

American States (OAS) (Goldschmidt, 1986; Pilotti, 1985). Various experts and observers from Latin America, Europe and the USA were present to develop further preparations for an Inter-American Convention to regulate and supervise transnational adoption procedures in Latin America (Pilotti, 1985). This led to the *Inter-American Convention of Conflict of Laws Concerning the Adoption of Minors* (hereafter, Inter-American Adoption Convention), approved in La Paz in May 1984. As described by Goldschmidt (1986, p. 266), this convention is of ‘historic importance’ and can be seen as the Latin American precursor of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption (HCIA), which was approved almost ten years later in 1993. Despite the introduction of the Inter-American Adoption Convention, it does not seem to have led to a revision of the adoption policy in Bolivia. What has been the effective impact of this convention on adoption policies in the signatory countries requires further research.

A third Minor’s Code was introduced in 1992, more than 15 years after the second Code of 1976. This Code came two years after Bolivia ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990.⁴ This new Minor’s Code reflected many of the ideals of the CRC, including further regulation of adoption practices.⁵ The Minor’s Code of 1992 was the first to address the regulation and supervision of transnational adoption circuits, leading to greater regulation and supervision of the various stakeholders involved in transnational adoption circuits (e.g., adoption agencies, local representatives, children’s homes, etc.). For instance, a National Agency for Minors, Women and Family (ONAMFA: *Organismo Nacional del Menor, Mujer y Familia*) was introduced with the task of regulating, monitoring, and overseeing policies on childhood, women, and the family, as well as to coordinate with national and international, private and governmental organisations on these issues (UDAPE & UNICEF, 2008). Implementing this new Code significantly changed transnational adoption procedures, as unofficial adoption intermediaries could no longer operate. Instead, only foreign organisations and institutions that complied with the regulations were accredited to carry out transnational adoptions. Nevertheless, it was not until 1994 that the Minor’s Code came into force, which led to temporarily freezing transnational adoptions the year before (see also Introduction).

In 1999, a new Code for Children and Adolescents (*Código del Niño, Niña, Adolescente*) appeared, which no longer spoke of *minors*, but of *children* and *adolescents* — this rhetorical shift was in line with the CRC (see also Villalta, 2009).⁶ In this Code, two new bodies were introduced in the field of child protection: the Departmental Social Management Services

4 Código del Menor, Law No. 1403 from 18 December 1992; Bolivia ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in May 1990 through Law No. 1152.

5 According to Leinaweaver and Seligmann (2009), many Latin American countries drafted and revised new Codes after ratifying the CRC in the early 1990s.

6 Código del Niño, Niña y Adolescente, Law No. 2026 from 27 October 1999.

(SEDEGES: *Servicios Departamentales de Gestión Social*) and the local child protection services (DNA: *Defensoría de la Niñez y Adolescencia*).⁷ The SEDEGES replaced ONAMFA and operated at the departmental level (one institution per department). At the same time, the DNAs worked at the municipal level (one office per district of the municipality), as they had to be easily accessible to the public. This Code also established a central authority to supervise transnational adoption procedures. Only a few years later, in 2002, Bolivia ratified the Hague Convention of Intercountry Adoption.

The most recent Code for Children and Adolescents dates back to 2014.⁸ This Code introduced the Integral Protection of Children and Adolescents (SIPPROINA: *Sistema Plurinacional de Protección Integral de la Niña, Niño y Adolescente*), which served to develop a comprehensive and integral approach to child protection. SIPPROINA consists of a number of bodies, institutions, organisations, and services whose main objective is to protect the rights of children and adolescents (see also, ICC and Aldeas Infantiles SOS, 2017, pp. 70-76), including the SEDEGES and DNAs, albeit with a tightening of their duties. It was only when this code came into force that transnational adoptions resumed in 2015, after being suspended in various departments due to several irregularities in the adoption system (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2015). The adoption policy under this new Code has also undergone various legislative changes in recent years, and articles have been amended and expanded, most notably the introduction of Law 1168, which was created to speed up the adoption procedure and match children available for adoption with prospective adoptive parents more quickly.

4.2.2 Local representatives on lack of supervision in the adoption system (1980s-1990s)

During my fieldwork, I spoke with several local representatives who had conducted transnational adoptions to countries in the Global North, including Belgium, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and the USA. *Local representatives* are professionals hired by foreign organisations (e.g., adoption agencies) to represent them with local authorities in the country of origin. These representatives are often local professionals and should be distinct from the term *intermediaries*, which I use more generally for the various actors in the adoption system. A local representative is an intermediary, but an intermediary is not necessarily a representative. Local representatives play a crucial role that is often overlooked in policy and research, as they occupy a strategic position in the adoption

⁷ There are several English translations for *Defensoría de la Niñez y Adolescencia* but I deliberately refer to this entity as 'local child protection services' as they claim to be a low-threshold service for child protection.

⁸ Código Niña, Niño y Adolescente, Law No. 548 from 17 July 2014.

system, and have close contacts with children's homes, social services, courts, central authorities and embassies (see also Loibl, 2019b, pp. 45-46). In addition, these representatives welcome and guide the adoptive parents in their adoption process.

In January 2020, I met Susana in a small German town to which she had immigrated several years ago. Susana is a Bolivian woman who worked as a local representative for a German and Belgian adoption agency and guided many adoptive families through their adoption process in Bolivia in the late 1980s and 1990s. When I talked to her, she quickly reminisced about her time as a representative. In our three-hour conversation, we talked about various topics, but in this section, I focus on her experience of working in a system that sought to regulate transnational adoptions in Bolivia.

Susana explained that when she started working as a local representative in 1987, she met various intermediaries and other representatives working in the field of transnational adoption. She said she had developed a good relationship with the representatives of other foreign adoption agencies. This good understanding later led to joint initiatives to regulate adoption better. When I asked Susana if she had experienced difficulties working with the other representatives, she answered the following:

Suppose you have 10, 12 or 15 people working in Bolivia for international adoptions, and they are authorised to work all over Bolivia. In that case, it is not difficult to get to know each other because it is in the same area and you always meet them in the offices, in the children's homes, in the courts, you have to go to the same places, so you always meet and eventually you become friends.

Since Susana had established a good relationship with the other local representatives, they were able to reach joint agreements. Susana explained that as representatives, they wanted to distinguish themselves from other profit-oriented intermediaries in order to prevent transnational adoption from becoming a lucrative baby business.

The lawyers who wanted to work in the field of international adoption wanted to charge a lot of money, and that was a problem. Still, through an agreement between representatives, we could regulate the prices of the expenses and not make a business like everybody else, "Oh, international adoption, 20 000 euros." So we made a list of costs plus professional honorariums and always adhered to this.

The local representatives worked according to a fixed price list for their services and later worked closely with ONAMFA via a Memorandum of Understanding (see later this section). I was pleasantly surprised to hear from Susana how they as local representatives took the initiative to work according to certain standards despite the absence of a coherent legal framework. I told Susana that I encountered some cases of adoptions carried out by private lawyers in which the first parents did not consent. I briefly told her about an adoption case to Germany in 1990 involving a lawyer. She immediately knew who I was talking about and said, "I know who he is." Susana explained to me that she

had heard stories about him. She exemplified her point by recounting her bad experience with a German couple she accompanied in their adoption procedure for a child in La Paz. Before this adoption, the couple had already adopted a girl with the help of the aforementioned lawyer. Susana explained that she and the couple went to the children's home, where the social worker appeared with a child in her arms. "I thought I could choose," Susana quoted one of the parents as saying. The couple explained that in the previous adoption process, the lawyer had taken them to the children's home and told them they could choose a child. Nonetheless, usually the matching between child and adoptive parents is decided upon by a judge. Susana assumed that the lawyer in question could make arrangements with the children's home without any supervision of a governmental body. Later in the conversation, Susana said that adoption intermediaries working in times with limited adoption laws (e.g., the Family Code (1972) and Minor's Code (1976)) were free to carry out adoptions without much accountability. She said, "Anyone could adopt, and it was legal. For example, I am not saying that what the lawyer did was illegal. It was legal because the law allowed anyone to do adoptions." These laws contained few control mechanisms built into them, which facilitated legal adoption even if illegal practices were relied upon to obtain children. Nevertheless, with the introduction of the third Minor's Code (1992), the lawyer was put out of action as he did not comply anymore with the official regulations installed. Not only this lawyer but also other intermediaries working at the fringes of the law were eliminated as a variety of rules and conditions were introduced to track transnational adoption circuits more strictly. According to Susana, these measures were taken because the image of transnational adoption was surrounded by negative media coverage:

It was always bad news. It was always news about child trafficking or enrichment. So Mrs. Paz Zamora⁹ tried to regulate the activity of adoptions because before she was in charge, any lawyer could do adoptions without being registered. So, she introduced the Memorandum of Understanding (*Cartas de Intenciones*). This was an agreement between institutions, in this case between ONAMFA, which was the *Organismo Nacional del Menor, Mujer y Familia* (National Agency for Minors, Women and Family), and its Belgian counterpart *Interadoptie*, which oversaw the follow-up of minors. For me, this was a big step forward.

According to Susana, this Memorandum of Understanding (Article 99 and Article 101, 1992 Minor's Code) was a new instrument to regulate further and monitor transnational adoption procedures and articulated the conditions and rules to become an accredited adoption organisation.

⁹ Rosario Paz Zamora was the then head of ONAMFA and sister of President Jaime Paz Zamora (1989-1993).

While Susana testified earlier that a good mutual relationship between representatives led to a positive change in the streamlining of the transnational adoption system, Ignacia, another local representative who started working for a French adoption agency in 1995 (and became a representative of another foreign adoption agency in 2004), told me a different story. I met Ignacia, a Bolivian social worker, at her mansion in Cochabamba, where I was warmly welcomed in June 2021. We had been in contact for a while, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it took more than a year before we could finally meet. Ignacia spoke at length and with great passion about her work experience as a local representative. She had worked for over 20 years and played an essential role in the transnational adoptions of some 250 children to two European countries. When I asked her the same question as Susana about the relationship between the representatives, she replied, “There was much competition.” Ignacia then gave me an example of an experience she had shortly after the 1999 Code for Children and Adolescent came into force:

The head of SEDEGES said to me, “I have children. Which one do you want?” and she showed me the pictures of some children. (...) She was the director of SEDEGES who only wanted money. She wanted money for SEDEGES. She asked if our organisation could give money and we gave no money. Nothing. We had no money, but she said: “No, [name of a country] gave me this car.”

Ignacia told me she refused to choose a child and pointed out to the director that they had to indicate which child would be the first to be considered for transnational adoption. At that moment, Ignacia realised that this director did not care about the welfare of the children but instead favoured local representatives who bribed her with money and/or gifts — the reference to the car being more figurative. This preferential treatment of some representatives at this particular SEDEGES got Ignacia into trouble, as some of the children initially assigned to her were later given to other local representatives. Because of this bad experience, Ignacia decided to stop working with this department and focused on the departments that operated according to the prescribed rules and guidelines of the Code of the time.

While adoption researchers usually give the testimonies of local representatives little attention, they provide interesting insights into the organisation of transnational adoptions. Susana’s account sheds light on the presence of private intermediaries in transnational adoption alongside the local representatives who worked for foreign adoption agencies in the second half of the 1980s under the Minor’s Code of 1976. In the absence of an elaborate policy to monitor and control transnational adoption circuits at the time, the door was opened to illegal and irregular practices in the official adoption system, leading to the ‘extraction’ of children to foreign couples. Her testimony demonstrates how the Minor’s Code of 1992 responded to these malpractices by allowing only accredited organisations to operate in Bolivia. Nevertheless, the introduction of the

two Codes in the 1990s did not mean the end of irregularities in the transnational adoption system, as Ignacia's experience with this SEDEGES shows. Since the 2000s, irregular adoption practices have regularly surfaced, leading to an administrative pause in 2007 that amounted to a temporary suspension of transnational adoption procedures in various departments of Bolivia (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2015).

4.3 In search of justice: First families on irregular adoptions in the 1980s

In this second part, I examine how first families exercise agency and resistance within the confines of an (unjust) adoption system. I draw from the testimonies of several Bolivian families whose children were legally adopted to Belgium, Germany, and the USA between 1984 and 1990 (under the Minor's Code of 1976). Their accounts reveal the irregularities and crimes made possible by the lack of control and monitoring of the transnational adoption circuits at that time. Nevertheless, the first family members' narratives show different strategies of resistance to cope with the injustices they experienced during this period.

4.3.1 Targeting vulnerable single mothers

In August 2020, a first-family search in La Paz led to Manuel, a young man in his early thirties. Manuel turned out to be the one-year-younger full brother of Adriana, a Bolivian adoptee from the USA with whom I had been in contact for a while. Manuel explained that he had been searching for his sister for several years (see section 4.4.1). He told the story of his mother, Yvelin, who lost her child to adoption in 1986. Although I met Yvelin several times when she reunited with Adriana, we did not talk about the adoption story. According to her son Manuel, it would be too stressful and traumatising for Yvelin to revisit this experience. For this reason, Yvelin did not tell her son about this adopted sister until later. Manuel explained that on a Sunday evening in October 2016, his mother mustered all her courage to tell him he had a full sister. Manuel could not believe his ears when his mother shared this "shocking news" with him. He tried to understand how his mother could "keep quiet" for so long, and he learnt that his mother had been hiding feelings of shame and guilt inside her all these years. As he puts it, "She was afraid that I thought she was a bad mother." Over time, Manuel also learnt that two family members were involved in the adoption, which appeared to be fraudulent. Moreover, Yvelin was prevented by these family members from talking about what had happened. Manuel said,

“They even told her never to tell me I had a sister. They forbade her to tell me (...). They told her many stories to make her forget her daughter. She was brainwashed.”

His mother, Yvelin, was 22 years old when she lost her newborn to adoption in March 1986. The exact motives why Yvelin was trapped by her relatives were unclear to Manuel, but he assumed the following, “A single mother! What is she going to do? What are we going to do? What will our relatives say? I think something like that has happened.” Manuel went on to tell how these relatives (of whom one was a lawyer) worked with a befriended lawyer to push through the adoption:

They took advantage of my mother... because my mother did not study. She did not finish school. She is a modest person. She was confronted by two lawyers with master’s degrees, one of them, Nilda, who is specialised in family law. They tried to trick my mother with lies: “You will not be able to raise the child,” “She was born sick,” “There are some *gringos* who can take care of her.” They have brainwashed her. What hurts my mother is that she was not allowed to hold Adriana in her arms. She only saw her from a distance crying. That was very traumatic for her. My mother did not know what was happening to her baby. She had just given birth. She was vulnerable. She had no strength. She was alone.

Manuel’s testimony points to the power imbalance between the mother and the two lawyers. The two women with law degrees formed a strong bloc against Yvelin, who could not escape their pressure as a young single mother from a modest background. One day after Adriana’s birth, the two women handed the baby to the adoptive parents and completed the necessary paperwork. According to Manuel, these people took his mother’s ID and falsified her signature to make it appear on paper that she had given her consent: “They had to go to the Civil Registry and forge her signature. My mother’s signature is easy to forge.” From then on, Yvelin was urged by the women to forget her daughter and to keep quiet about it to her children, who were born later.

In another case, a young single mother, Mariela, was persuaded by a lawyer in 1990 to give her child up for adoption. Although I spoke briefly with Mariela on the phone, I was unable to meet her. Instead, I met some of her siblings who told the adoption story in more detail. For instance, in a conversation with Mariela’s younger sister, Janine, she explained how Mariela’s child, Lena, was adopted by a German couple when she was only one year old. During the conversation, Janine took a photo book with pictures the first family had received of Lena as a child and she began to tell how the adoption came about. Janine said her sister was only fifteen years old when she became a single mother. Since the father did not want to take up his responsibilities, she was on her own. Janine describes with a trembling voice that Mariela “fell into disgrace”:

We never wanted to give Lena up for adoption. We never wanted to give her away. Well, we were very poor then. Now, at least, we are better off. Sometimes we had no bread to eat, no means, nothing. We all lived in a small room, but we were happy.

Nevertheless, my sister had fallen into disgrace. She had had Lena when she was only fifteen years old. She was still a minor. (...) And well, my mother went to the countryside when my sister went looking for a job. It is then that she [Mariela] met this lawyer Castellanos. He had told her that there was a children's home where she could leave her daughter. She could leave her daughter there for a whole week and could only see her once a week. And well, she accepted it and left her daughter there so she could go to work. The day she left her daughter there, well, she was crying. My siblings asked her, "Where is Lena?" When my mother came back [from the countryside] two days later, she asked, "Where is the baby?" and Mariela said, "She is in a children's home." "What?! Where?! How?!" my mother freaked out. She made a scandal to look for Lena until we finally found the guy who had ensnared my sister because we went to the children's home to look for Lena. It was not a children's home; it was supposed to be a day-care centre (*una guardería*) ...and she was no longer there. We then looked in all the children's homes, in all the possible places where she could be... But we did not find her. (...) Also, this lawyer falsified my sister's ID because she was only fifteen years old, and he made her look like she was twenty. (...) After a month, we found out that Lena had been given up for adoption to Germany. (...) Then we got in touch with the family where Lena was adopted. We saw that the family... They seemed to be good people. They were not bad. The ones who were bad were the ones who hurt us and took advantage of us. (...) The only thing we managed to get was that the man who stole Lena from us signed that he had to bring us photos of her every year.

Janine's testimony shows how the poor background of the family and the status of a single teenage mother made Mariela an easy target to mislead. Janine emphasised her family's efforts to search for Lena by visiting various children's homes in the following days, but their attempts were in vain. The lawyer was eventually picked up and charged for the 'laundering' of children for transnational adoption purposes, but Lena was already adopted abroad. When the family had received more information and the reassurance that a new family was taking good care of Lena, the family decided to live with the fact that Lena was adopted to Germany and to settle for an arrangement whereby they would receive pictures of Lena every year. This turned out to be the only way for the family to 'stay in touch' with her.

Although in both cases, the adoption was carried out 'legally,' the stories of the first relatives shed a different light on this status. In both stories, the relatives testify to illegal practices of 'child laundering' in which lawyers played a significant role (for similar practices of child laundering, see Smolin, 2006). In both cases, the lawyer was the intermediary between the Bolivian mother and the adoptive family and got the adoption papers in order so that everything appeared legal and correct. Nevertheless, their stories seem to indicate that the loopholes in the system made transnational adoptions very vulnerable to exploitation and abuse at that time. Manuel and Janine expressed

frustration at the damage these people had done to their families and presumably to other families.

At last, we found this lawyer. They caught him. He was... a horrible and inhuman person who stole many children. They caught him, but it was not just him. There were other lawyers who trapped people by stealing their children and giving them up for adoption. (...) This man had done a lot of damage... a lot of damage here in Bolivia. His house was huge, more like a mansion, unbelievable, and meanwhile, he took advantage of our pain. (Janine, interview November 2018)

The damage she caused... It is unfair that she can sit quietly at home. I have been to her house. Her house is a luxury. I said to myself, "Wow, this woman, where does she work? She has benefited from my sister." (Manuel, interview August 2020)

Manuel and Janine refer to the luxurious home of the lawyers involved and regarded it almost as a symbol of personal enrichment for adoption. It is these adoption scandals of "child trafficking and personal enrichment" that Susana talked about in the previous section.

When this particular lawyer, named Castellanos, was caught by the authorities, Janine explained how her family initially wanted to reclaim Lena but were not able to do so because of their weak economic position and their lack of money for such a procedure: "We did not have the economics means to get her back; how to file a lawsuit and so on." Manuel considered criminal proceedings (*acción penal*) as a last resort to obtain information about where his sister was adopted.

If my mother would go to heaven, I would initiate criminal proceedings. I didn't do it because my mother is fragile and will get very involved. A criminal case wears you down. It makes you... It's ugly. It would also affect my mother's health.

During our first conversation, Manuel expressed that he wanted to consider initiating criminal proceedings only after the death of his mother to find his sister. In this way, he wanted to protect his mother, who is in frail health and for whom legal proceedings might be too much to bear. Having studied law himself, Manuel has a good idea of what criminal procedure entails. He further explained that in Bolivia, there is no statute of limitations on filing a criminal complaint for trafficking and smuggling (*una demanda penal por trata y tráfico*) (see Art. 44, Law N° 263). In a later conversation with Manuel when he was reunited with his sister, he said he no longer considered taking legal action against the lawyer.

Both stories of Manuel and Janine provide a unique glimpse of how illegal activities were carried out in legal adoption procedures in the late 1980s. Media reports about malpractices both in Bolivia and elsewhere in Latin America, resulted in increasing calls to introduce more strict controls to the transnational adoption procedure (Goldschmidt, 1986; Pilotti, 1985), leading to a thorough revision of the adoption system in the later Codes. Janine's story also shows that despite the lack of means to reclaim Lena legally, the

families managed to obtain information from Lena annually through letters and pictures. In this way, they resisted the consequences of an irregular adoption within the limits of the means at their disposal and found peace in the fact that the child was doing well. In the next section, I will take a closer look at a case in which a Bolivian father even travelled to the country of adoption to retrieve his child.

4.3.2 The search for an adopted/abducted child in 1983-1984

In July 2018, I was invited to meet Astrid's Bolivian parents in Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Astrid, a Bolivian adoptee who was adopted to Belgium in 1983 and was in her mid-thirties at the time, had looked for and found her Bolivian family about ten years earlier. She has been in good contact with them ever since. Her parents, Fabio and Magaly, welcomed me warmly into their home and showed genuine interest in my research project by sharing their stories over lunch.

At the dining table, Fabio began to summarise the adoption of his daughter, which was a child abduction. He explained that Astrid was kidnapped by a criminal organisation in 1983 when she was only one and a half years old. He emphasised that the organisation was profit-driven, "they sold the children for economic purposes." Fabio described how a new birth certificate was created for Astrid, which contained the name of a fictitious mother, a fictitious date of birth and a fictitious name for Astrid. This gave the appearance that "everything was legal." Next, the adoption was approved by the Children's Council (*Consejo del Menor*). This institution provided limited supervision of (transnational) adoption procedures in Bolivia at the time, according to the Minor's Code of 1976.

When I asked Fabio how he remembered the day of the kidnapping, he replied: "A tremendous trauma," and the tears welled up. His daughter Astrid comforted him. Magaly took the floor and explained that she and her husband worked as merchants (*comerciantes*) while their two daughters played in the nearby market square. A woman approached the eldest daughter of six and asked her if she wanted to buy something sweet. The woman urged the sister to go to her parents and ask for money while Astrid stayed with the woman. When the sister returned, Astrid had disappeared. The alarming news spread quickly, and a large-scale search operation began. The media followed the case closely, and an investigation was launched.¹⁰ The parents played an essential role in this, paying various media outlets weekly to continue broadcasting their appeals and even flying the press into La Paz when the trial began there.

¹⁰ Astrid gave me some clues as to when articles appeared in which newspapers. During my stay in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, I also delved into the archives of these newspapers to read these articles with full attention.

Magaly: Here, everything is money. If you do not have money, everyone closes the door for you. The press I paid weekly. The radio I paid weekly.

Fabio: For example, when I flew to La Paz, I had to pay for a plane for five journalists and the same for the return flight. An enormous expense, but I managed.

This family had sufficient funds to publicise the search locally and even nationally. The parents were able to fund the search initially, mainly because they had their own thriving business (to this day). “The radio was constantly broadcasting our appeal,” Fabio said. After some time, these appeals brought a breakthrough in the case. Fabio recounts, “A mother came forward and told me that her daughter had gone missing with the same *modus operandi* in the same district.” Fabio went on to explain that this child had a cleft lip and was seen with the thief (*la maleanta*), which led to her arrest. Fabio and Magaly then found out that several children had been kidnapped by the same criminal organisation in this market area. When the kidnapper was arrested, she confessed that she had abducted five children in Santa Cruz de la Sierra and sold them to a lawyer who, in turn, took care of the paperwork so foreign couples could adopt them. A newspaper reported that the mother and her child were reunited only a few hours after the abduction. At the same time, other parents of other abducted children waited for more news about their children (El Deber, 1983). According to the newspaper, three children, including Astrid, were placed with adoptive families abroad, while the adoption of two children was stopped in time. These two children were reunited with their parents later that same day (see Figure 2).

Although Mariela and Yvelin (from the previous section) did not pursue legal action, it is important to note that their situation was complicated by the stigma and shame they experienced, as well as their socioeconomic background. In contrast, Fabio and Magaly’s case was a clear case of abduction, which may have made legal action a more viable option for them. Fabio had to travel to La Paz, where the trial took place. Nevertheless, the trial also had financial consequences for the family, as Magaly told me, “He had stopped working. I worked as usual. I always had my little shop in the market. I could not go to the hearings because I had two children.” Since the parents had two other children to take care of, they decided that Fabio would take care of the court case while Magaly combined her work with taking care of the other two children. At some point, however, they ran out of money; Magaly explains: “We had no money to continue. We had no money. It was over. Pay a lawyer in La Paz and another lawyer in Santa Cruz. Pay. Pay. Pay!” Fortunately, they received additional financial support from their friends, family, and other supporters.

Through the lawsuit, the parents accessed the adoption file that the accused lawyer had submitted to the Children’s Council to facilitate Astrid’s adoption to Belgium. Fabio and Magaly saw new photos of Astrid, a forged birth certificate and the names and address details of the Belgian adoptive parents. Fabio summarised: “Then I had her photo, the



Figure 2: "Some of the parents who have lost their children. One of them in his mother's arms after being recovered a few hours ago." (original caption, translated to English) in newspaper El Deber (1983)

address where she was taken. Everything. I found my daughter. I finally knew where she was." The court case led to Fabio being supported by the Bolivian government to present his case in Belgium. He decided to fly to Belgium and was accompanied there by the Bolivian consul to talk to the relevant Belgian authorities and find out how they could repatriate his daughter. After many months, Fabio could finally see his daughter again in Belgium.

We went to Belgium to look for my daughter. We already had the address and everything. I went with the consul to find my daughter. He arranged a meeting with the adoptive parents. However, the consul told me that the adoptive parents did not want to return my daughter, "They do not want to return her because they are already used to her. She will be even more traumatised when she returns to Bolivia." They convinced me. They said, "You can come and visit us any time you want. We will teach her the language." So we made an agreement. We agreed that my daughter would stay there. She stayed there, and I could return to Bolivia without worrying.

However, against all odds, he agreed to leave his daughter with the adoptive parents. He saw that the adoptive parents were good people who wanted the best for his daughter. These new parents convinced Fabio not to reclaim Astrid and bring her to Bolivia, arguing that she could be re-traumatised by the separation. Astrid intervened in the conversation and told her father, “It was a bigger trauma for you than it was for me,” since she herself had no memories of the abduction and adoption. Magaly nuances Fabio’s statement and adds that they were not able to finance a court case in Belgium:

Another thing is that we had no money for a lawyer in Belgium. They said, “If you want, we’ll go to the courts” And the courts there... Bolivian money is not worth much there in Belgium.

The father returned to Bolivia empty-handed but with the idea that his daughter would be fine. However, contact between Fabio and the adoptive parents was not maintained, and the adoption remained a closed adoption. Fabio told me that the adoptive parents did not believe he was their adopted child’s genetic father because they were convinced that the adoption had been carried out legally. Only when Astrid returned to Bolivia at the age of 24 and began looking for her Bolivian family, her adoptive father told her about Fabio’s visit in the 1980s. This accelerated her search for her Bolivian family, and she soon met Fabio and his family. After a DNA test confirmed their genetic relationship, Astrid was sure she had found her Bolivian parents.

Towards the end of the conversation, Fabio said: “My case is different. It seems that I am the only one in all Bolivia (of the parents whose children had been abducted) who has seen his daughter again in this period.” According to him, the other Bolivian families are still in the dark about what happened to their abducted child. The case of Fabio and Magaly is exceptional because they managed to obtain information about their daughter and even travel to Belgium.

The three cases discussed, told from the point of view of the first families, give an interesting insight into their experience of the illegal activities within the legal adoption system at that time. As we saw in the first part, before the 1992 Minor’s Code, transnational adoption circuits in Bolivia were hardly monitored and controlled by state institutions. This allowed baby brokers to obtain children illegally but pass this off as legal adoptions of orphans. The first parents’ accounts contribute to recent anthropological research on irregular adoptions told from the perspective of transnational adoptees (Branco & Cloonan, 2022; Hernandez, 2022) and adoptive parents (Steenrod, 2022), in addition to the multiple studies on irregular and illegal adoptions. It is also noteworthy that in the three cases, the adoptees did not learn of the illegality of their adoption until adulthood. This is mainly due to the conviction that the adoption process, and thus also the adoption papers, had been carried out legally and correctly. Nevertheless, these adoptions can be considered ‘legal fictions’ in the sense that the lawyers invented their origin stories (see also Smolin, 2004, p. 282). The narratives of Janine, Fabio and Magaly

also show how they resist these illegal practices and actively search for the missing child. Both cases show that the financial situation of the first parents plays a crucial role in their ability to act and reach out to the public. This is evident in the accounts of Fabio and Magaly, whose economic situation enabled them to search for their daughter actively, take legal action in Bolivia and travel to Belgium in search of justice. Like Janine's story, Fabio and Magaly breathed a sigh of relief when they learnt that well-meaning people had adopted their daughter. This enabled them to 're-exist.'

4.4 Present-day searches by first families

In this final part, I focus on searches of first families in the present day and explore how they can exercise agency even when constrained by a lack of rights and support structures in their search for their adopted children. In the first section, I return to Manuel's story, but this time I pay attention to the various steps he took in searching for his sister in the late 2010s. In the second section, I look at the search attempts and reunion wishes of first parents whose children were adopted in the 2000s and 2010s (under the Code for Children and Adolescents of 1999).

4.4.1 "We only want to know if she is still alive"

In 2016, Yvelin summoned the courage to tell her son Manuel that he had a full sister whom foreigners adopted in 1986. Yvelin had kept this a secret for more than 30 years, but it was only when a close relative involved in the adoption died that she felt comfortable to tell Manuel. After hearing the news, Manuel promised his mother to look for his sister.

I have seen my mother suffer so much. She has always been by my side. She has always taken care of me. She has always fed me. In other words, she acted like a good mother. And when she told me that, I felt quite sorry for her because... because what happened to her was a drama. A very terrible drama. It is a pain that she kept to herself for so long. (...) I told her, "Mother, calm down. Let me think about things. You must tell me everything. I will help you find my sister, but you must tell me everything that happened, OK?"

In the months that followed, Yvelin recounted as many details as possible. Because of her frail health, Yvelin could not search for her daughter herself. Therefore, Manuel suggested that he would initiate the search, which he began in mid-2018. During the

interview, Manuel said he first tried to collect data from the hospital where his mother gave birth to her daughter Adriana. Manuel wanted access to the file that documented some (medical) details of the birth. Manuel's background in legal studies helped him navigate what he could legally claim. He explained, "Anyone can ask for the birth records. They must give them to you. They cannot refuse because it is a constitutional right." With this in mind, he wrote a letter to the hospital staff on behalf of his mother, invoking this constitutional right and asking to see the archived records of Yvelin's delivery at the hospital. In the weeks that followed, he went back regularly to see if his request was granted, but "like always here, they say 'come back tomorrow.'" Manuel referred to the highly bureaucratic system in most public institutions (including hospitals) where people have to go back continuously to get the requested information (for more on Bolivia's bureaucracy, see e.g. Wanderley, 2009). When Manuel asked for another update a month later, he was told that the requested file no longer existed. He immediately asked for an explanation and was told that his mother's name did not appear in the archived documents of that year. This trail was a dead end for Manuel.

In a second attempt to get more information, Manuel talked to various family members who knew about the adoption of Adriana. However, the family members do not recall much until he approached a relative who was involved in the adoption.

I confronted her and said, "I want to know where my sister is." She could not believe it... "How did he find out," she must have thought. ... I said, "You see, my mother needs peace in her heart. She always helped your mother at home. Please, just give us a name. I am not here to fight... We only want to know if she is still alive", but no. She would not tell me. She would not tell me anything: "I do not know anything. I cannot remember." Until one day she gave me a piece of paper with Nilda's name on it... "That's all I can give you now, do not look for me anymore."

This relative gave Manuel the name of the lawyer involved in the adoption. With this name, Manuel could search for the lawyer in a register of licenced lawyers and found her there, "I found Nilda. I found her picture in the register of the bar association." Manuel printed out the lawyer's picture, showed it to his mother and asked, "Is this the lawyer who did the paperwork?" and she recognised her from the photo...." With this confirmation, Manuel sought more information about her, "So what do I do? I go to Nilda's Facebook page. Thank God she doesn't know how to use Facebook." Since the lawyer had set her privacy settings to public, Manuel could see all her posts, pictures, and Facebook friends.

Among these friends was this couple. Intuitively I said: "Mama, come and see, come and see... Here she is. Are these the people you saw there?" ... She saw them and started crying bitterly. She said, "Yes, it's them." Okay, I'm close to find my sister, then.

Yvelin had seen the adoptive parents when the adoption was finalised in 1986. She told Manuel that these parents were White, so he searched the lawyer's friends list for Facebook profiles that contained pictures of potential transracial adoptive families. He then found a Facebook profile of a presumed adoptive parent with a girl with similar characteristics to his mother. Manuel was convinced that he had found his sister, "It's her. There's no other way. They're all *gringos, choquitos*.¹¹ She's different. It's her. There is so much coincidence." He asked himself how to determine if he was on the right track. He decided to seek out Nilda and called her to arrange a meeting. Unsuspecting, Nilda accepted Manuel's request and agreed to meet at her home in May 2019. During the interview, Manuel said he was very nervous, "It was one of the most difficult days of my life because I went into the lion's den. I went to meet the woman who caused tremendous harm to my mother and sister." Nervously, Manuel waited outside the house of Nilda, who arrived a little later. Once inside, Manuel revealed why he visited, "*Doctora*, I am looking for my sister. You did the paperwork for her adoption. I have the papers here."¹² According to Manuel, the atmosphere became hostile, and Nilda immediately asked for his ID. Manuel asked if Nilda did not recognise anyone in a picture of the presumed transracial adoptive family he found on Facebook.

"There are some photos, *doctora*. Look! Do you know these people? I am looking for my sister, and I think this is her". She got angry, "No, you tapped into my Facebook. Those photos are mine, you invaded my privacy." I replied, "But *doctora*, you do not have privacy on your Facebook." She said, "You are tapping my photos, you are invading my privacy" and so on. I explained, "Look. Look, *doctora*, I came here in peace, and I am here because of my mother. She gave her little girl up for adoption, and she did it without her consent. She has been misled. She wants to know about her. At least she wants to know if she is alive. Please." I asked again, "Help me. I am not here to fight or anything. I just want you to help me. My mother needs to have peace in her heart. That's all I ask, *doctora*." Then she said to me, "You're here for money."

That she suspected Manuel of being after money made him furious, "I did not understand that woman. What does she think? That everything is about money? She went too far. It made me very angry." Nilda then indicated that the adoptive family was well off and could probably give him money to keep him quiet. Manuel, who was totally disgusted by this behaviour, tried again to make it clear to the lawyer that he was not there to ask for money but to find out where his sister was. "In the end, she said that she was going to give me the benefit of the doubt," added Manuel. Manuel told me that the conversation ended when Nilda finally agreed to look up some information about the adoption, which

11 The terms 'gringo' and 'choquito' are racial slurs to refer to white people.

12 The term 'doctora' is a common form of address for female lawyers.

turned out to be an excuse to get rid of him. Manuel did not push any further, also because contact with her frightened him “...because you mess with mobsters. This lawyer is possibly part of a larger network.”

Eventually, Manuel decided to contact the woman he believed to be his sister in early 2020 after finding her contact details on social media. Still, he was concerned about sharing all this information with her: “How do you tell someone? If a person is living a normal life and suddenly someone tells them, ‘Look, this is what happened. You are adopted.’ You do not want to harm that person.” Manuel told me that he had gone to see a psychologist to get advice on how to get in touch with the woman he thought was his sister. With some guidelines, he felt confident to write her a letter.

I wrote this girl a letter and enclosed my DNA test results. I wanted to let her know that her mother was looking for her and her brother was also looking for her. (...) Then the pandemic came... That was even more pressure because, well, anyone could get infected. Something could happen to my mother and thank God nothing has happened to her. Something could happen to me. So I have to write this letter immediately and not lose any time. I wrote a letter to this girl. I told her that I am her brother, and her mother lives here. “We are looking for you. I do not want to hurt you. My name is Manuel, I live in La Paz. We think you are my sister.”

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic urged Manuel to finish his letter (in Spanish) and email it to the woman he thought was his sister in March 2020. Subsequently, he told his mother, Yvelin, that the email had been sent but that she should not get her hopes up too much: “She could react positively. She may respond negatively, or she may not respond at all.” When Mayerlin, the research assistant, and I met Manuel in August 2020, he was still awaiting a response. He told us that he had almost given up hope, “I stopped looking, and my hopes went out. Until you came, and already you have changed the course of history....” Through our first-family search, at Adriana’s request, we found Manuel. During our first meeting with Manuel, we told him that Adriana had been adopted by an adoptive family in the USA. We showed him Adriana’s old birth certificate, which had the mother’s name, Yvelin, on it. With this turn of events, Manuel had to let this news sink in. It seemed Manuel had found his sister after all, even if it was not the woman in the pictures he had written to earlier. After we had passed on Adriana’s contact information to Manuel, he wrote her an email to his long-lost sister the same day: “Hola Adriana. Manuel here, your lost brother from La Paz, Bolivia. You don’t know how much I have been looking for you...”

Manuel’s testimony offers a unique account of his search for his adopted sister. In this narrative, we can read how thoughtfully he examined different steps and considered different search strategies over a period of four years. His search is similar on several levels to the first-family searches of adoptees, such as going to a hospital to request access to the archives or confronting actors involved in the adoption process. Also, his use of

modern technologies such as DNA testing and social media are tools adoptees have used for some time to search for relatives (see e.g., Haralambie, 2013; Shier, 2021; Suter & Docan-Morgan, 2022). Moreover, the COVID-19 context added even more time pressure to his search. Although Manuel's approach is similar to that of adoptees, the main difference is that adoptees are able to invoke 'the right to know,' enshrined in national and international laws (Law 548, CRC and HCIA). Still, even then, adoptees cannot always access the information they want. First parents and family members do not have a similar right to information as adoptees do under the Code for Children's and Adolescents (Law N°548). Therefore, first parents face many obstacles in their search and have to try different strategies due to the lack of support.

In Bolivia, first families have no structural support to fall back on if they want to obtain information about their adopted family member. Even in the case of an irregular or illegal adoption, initiating criminal proceedings seems to be the only way to get information. Despite the lack of any structural support in the search for his sister, Manuel went his own way and sought advice from various professionals to conduct his search as best he could. In adoption research, studies of search and reunion are always told from the perspective of the adoptee or their adoptive parents (see for example Branco et al., 2022; Docan-Morgan, 2014; Wang et al., 2015). Furthermore, most adoption guides on search and reunion address adoptees and their adoptive families (Bailey & Giddens, 2001; ISS, 2018). Few studies have addressed the search of first families in the context of transnational adoption (see for example, Clemente Martínez, 2022a; Prébin, 2009). Similar to the cases in the previous part, Manuel expressed his desire to know if his sister was still alive ("We only want to know if she is still alive"). His account complements the earlier stories of first relatives who testified that it was unbearable not to know what had happened to their child. Accordingly, he and his mother also found peace only after they met Adriana. From then on, their process of 're-existence' could begin and build a future with Adriana in their lives.

4.4.2 *No vivir esperando*: Searching, hoping and waiting

In this final empirical section, I look at the stories of Bolivian parents and relatives whose children were adopted in the 2000s and 2010s. In contrast to the previous reports, these children were adopted in a reformed child protection system that complies with international conventions regarding children's rights and adoption (under the Code for Children and Adolescents of 1999). On the one hand, the parents were either deprived of parental rights or gave them up themselves. But for these parents, the prevailing question was often what had become of their children, where they were, who they were with and whether they were doing well.

I begin with the story of a mother I met in November 2018 when she was actively searching for her then-15-year-old son. This mother visited a NGO in La Paz, hoping this organisation could help her. A professional of this organisation, Anamaria, called me that morning and asked if I wanted to come by and meet this woman. When I entered the room, I saw a woman in her early thirties sitting at the table with Anamaria. The woman, whose name was Elsa, explained that she had lost custody of her son at the age of 16-17 due to neglect and alcohol abuse in the early 2000s. The son was a little over a year old at the time when he came under the supervision of the child protection system. From the conversation, I learnt that the mother's second child was also placed in a children's home when she was later sent to prison for reasons that were not explained during the meeting. However, after her release, she managed to get her child back and met this NGO during this process. When I met Elsa, she seemed to have a more stable life. Elsa explained to Anamaria that she wanted to know where her son was: "I would like to meet him and know where he is." Elsa said her two children, aged seven and nine, were also curious about their lost brother and "wanted to meet him." Elsa further explained that during the proceedings in which she was deprived of her parental rights, all the necessary documents of her son were requested, including his birth certificate. Because of all the paperwork, it seemed logical to her that her son had been registered in the child protection system and therefore child welfare professionals needed to know where he was. Elsa argued, "I filed all his papers with the court. They must be there. They should get them from the archives." However, Anamaria explained that it is not that simple, as Elsa is no longer legally related to her son. She pointed out that even for adoptees, whose right to information is embedded in the Code for Children and Adolescent, it is difficult to obtain information from the relevant institutions and stated, "All these papers exist in the court, but the problem is that they will not give you any information in court, because the only one who can ask for it in court is your child." With this, Anamaria indicated that the system is set up so that only the adoptee can access the information, albeit with the usual bureaucratic procedures.

Anamaria told Elsa that her work often takes her to different children's homes in La Paz and El Alto, and that she knows most of the children but that the name of Elsa's son did not ring a bell. She said that she thought the boy must have been adopted, probably abroad, because in the early 2000s there were many children of that age ended up in transnational adoption programmes. The professional then said to Elsa:

I think that should give you peace in your heart because you know your son is somewhere and he is very much loved because adoptive families very much want to have a child. That is why they go through the whole process and travel to Bolivia. It is also true — I think — that adoptive families do not talk badly about you. So, it is possible that one day he will come to Bolivia or maybe not because it depends on each child. (...) But the most important thing is that you have peace in your heart that your child is doing well. That wherever he is, his parents are giving him an

education, and they have given him many opportunities. (...) If one day your son comes looking for you, wonderful! If he does not come, there is not much we can do from here (...) But I think it is better not to wait for it (*no vivir esperando*) because maybe it will not happen.

Although Anamaria treated Elsa with kindness and emphasised that she could turn to them at any time, they mainly tried to ensure that Elsa would accept the situation and stop waiting and hoping for her son's return.¹³

In various encounters with first relatives, however, I found they continued to hope and wait for their children to return. Some parents even actively sought information or tried to re-establish contact by visiting the children's homes. Fabiana, for example, had given her two children up for adoption in 2009. Her only condition was not to separate the children. After her children were placed in a children's home, Fabiana occasionally visited them and brought them clothes. At one point, she learnt from an employee that the children were adopted abroad, "They told me they were already gone with their adoptive parents. I asked, 'How are they? Are they good people?' The employee responded, 'Yes, they are good people.'" Fabiana knew this moment would come and was at peace with the fact that her children had ended up with benevolent adoptive parents.

In another case, Linda, a mother who had been deprived of parental rights, knocked on the door of various children's homes to look for her children:

I knew of only two children's homes. I went there. I gave the names of my daughters, but nothing. Where did my daughters go? Where did they go? I went to *Children's Home 1*, and they were not there. I went to *Children's Home 2*, but they were not there either. Where could they be? Eventually, I found out that my daughters were in Holland.

This news came as a shock to Linda, and she felt devastated, "I felt sadness at that moment. I did not know whether to bear it or kill myself." Years later, she found her children through social media and came to terms with their fate, "I am glad I do not have to worry about them. They will be fine."

Only some of the parents I talked to found the courage to search for the child, as they were very aware of the consequences of doing so while they had signed away their parental rights. In the case of Tomás and Iris, they had given their daughter up for adoption as an infant due to financial reasons. I met both parents as a result of a first-family search (see also Chapter 6). I provided them with pictures of their daughter, and they told me how they had not forgotten their child. Tomás illustrated:

13 The Spanish verb 'esperar' means 'to hope' or 'to wait.'

How can anyone not love his child? But I had not many resources... The truth is... I know she is alive now. I look at her [looks at the picture]. It's difficult to get information, right? They will not give me anything, will they?

The fragment suggests that Tomás is cognizant of his limitations in obtaining information about his daughter. It is plausible that at the time of signing the declaration of relinquishment, the parents were informed by child welfare professionals about the consequences, including that they were no longer entitled to receive information about their daughter. It was a relief for the parents to learn that their child had ended up with loving adoptive parents, as Iris puts it: “Every day I thought of her. I asked myself, ‘Will she still be alive?’ ‘What happened to her?’ I was really worried.” The father, in turn, expressed hope that his daughter would return one day, “Hopefully, she will come back. What else can I hope for?” Similarly, this sense of hope was also present in the testimony of Catarina, whose nieces were adopted transnationally. She told me:

I had hope. I never lost faith because I have my *San Martincito*.¹⁴ I have great faith in him and call on him for everything. I have always cried out to him. I did not want to die without knowing the girls. (...) I used to say, “San Martin, wherever these girls have been, let them be in good hands.” Most people who take them as... servants, exploit them, right? (...) That was always my thought, that the girls would have been with good people, that they would have been in good hands.

Feelings of hope prevailed among many first parents in this study. Some of these families actively searched, while others continued to hope, pray and wait for the child to return one day.

4.5 Concluding remarks

I began this chapter by asking how the relationship between *extraction* and *resistance* plays out in the case of transnational adoption and, in particular, first families. I showed that in the 1980s the lack of a well-monitored and supervised transnational adoption system allowed the flourishing of extractive adoption practices. Even when new Codes were established, irregularities continued to emerge in the adoption system, leading to various revising and suspensions of transnational adoption procedures. Although generalisations cannot be made for all adoptions in Bolivia, the cases studied are consistent with previous findings by scholars who have pointed out that transnational adoption in Latin America

¹⁴ San Martin de Porres is Peruvian patron saint.

had developed into a global market for children in the 1970s and 1980s, as adoption was hardly monitored and regulated in many Latin American countries (Carro, 1994; Goldschmidt, 1986; Pilotti, 1985). Based on the testimonies and my observation of how various illegal and irregular practices took place in the official adoption system, I consider these adoptions as ‘legal adoptions’ rather than ‘illegal adoptions.’ By doing so, I want to place responsibility on the adoption system, which approved these irregular but legal adoptions in the first place and demonstrates that these issues are structural in nature and not just individual incidents. It is also noteworthy in this context that the adoptees in these cases only learnt later in adulthood that their adoption had been carried out under false pretences since all the paperwork was legally correct and approved by the legal authorities.

However, I also showed in this chapter that first parents and relatives have resisted the extractive nature of the adoption system. Despite the prevailing image of first families as passive and silent victims from the Global South (Högbacka, 2014), many of the families interviewed have attempted to search for their children and/or waited for them to return. These families have ‘delinked’ themselves from the rules of the transnational adoption system, which prevents first families from obtaining any information about the adopted child. This process of ‘delinking’ allows these families to ‘think otherwise’ (Mignolo, 2001, p. 11) and to develop ways and strategies to find and connect with their children. Clemente Martínez (2022a, p. 10) states that the searches of first families ‘challenge the global system and image the Western world has of them’ and can thus exceed their subalternity. The testimonies of the first families show how they exercise their agency and resistance by searching. These strategies of first families enable them to find ways of liberation and ‘re-existence’ in which they are able to ‘surpass and overcome’ adverse conditions ‘in order to occupy a social and cultural place of dignity’ (Walsh, 2018, p. 95) and to restore their humanity.

Chapter 5 Framing child abandonment: Adoption documents, bad mothers, and inadequate housing

5.1 Introduction

The making of families –i.e., the ‘kinning’ (Howell, 2006, p. 77) between the adoptive family and the adopted child –has been studied extensively (e.g. De Graeve, 2012; Dorow, 2006; Howell, 2006). However, the unmaking of families –i.e. ‘de-kinning’ (Högbacka, 2016, p. 5) between the first family and their child– remains an understudied topic. Moreover, the few studies that have shifted their focus to de-kinning have concentrated on Asia (Bos, 2007; Clemente Martínez, 2022b; Johnson, 2016; H. Kim, 2016), South Africa, (Högbacka, 2016) and Guatemala (Monico, 2021). There has been little academic attention to first families in Bolivia and the role of the child protection system.

Sociological studies on child protection systems have alerted to the coercive character of the system that results in children being unfairly taken away from their families due to structural factors (housing, unemployment, lack of basic services, etc.) (Edwards, 2016; Fong, 2020). Various studies have shown that child welfare policies target racially disadvantaged and impoverished families, making them more likely to lose their children to institutional care and/or be deprived of their parental rights (Briggs, 2021; Mack, 2021; Polikoff & Spinak, 2021; Roberts, 2002, 2022). For this reason, Roberts has referred to this system as the ‘family-policing system,’ because she believes it better describes its purpose and effects, namely the *policing* of families. (Roberts, 2022). These studies aim to provide a sociological analysis of how the child protection system is characterised by structural inequalities that mostly affect marginalised families rather than glorifying the institution of the family. Many of the studies mentioned focus on a North American context, but similar mechanisms and practices also take place in Latin America (LaBrenz, Reyes-Quilodran, Padilla-Medina, Arevalo Contreras, & Cabrera Piñones, 2022). A large-scale study (RELAF, 2010) involving several Latin American countries (Brazil, Chile, Colombia,

Ecuador, Guatemala and Mexico) examined the various contexts, causes and consequences of children who have lost parental care. This study shows that poverty and inequality are the principal causes of losing parental care (RELAF, 2010), and not simply due to parents' inability to provide for their children. In Bolivia, too, several local and national studies have examined the situation of children who have lost parental care or were at risk of losing parental care (Aldeas Infantiles SOS, 2011; Chirino Ortiz, 2017; IICC and Aldeas Infantiles SOS, 2017). The studies show the multi-layered and complex familial context that eventually leads to the outplacement of the child. Although these studies have begun to give us a better understanding of the Bolivian child protection system, further research is needed. There is still limited understanding of the actual working of the child protection system and the role of social reports and documents in the de-kinning process.

However, social reports and adoption documents play an important role in the making and unmaking of families in the context of adoption. The paperwork plays a crucial role in justifying the removal of children from their first families, turning them into orphaned children. Much can be learnt from how first families are portrayed in social reports and adoption documents. Various scholars have pointed out that documents and reports can 'make a powerful claim to the truth' (Leinaweaver, 2019, p. 5) or give 'social facts' the status of qualified knowledge (Stoler, 2009, p. 22). Anthropologist Eleana Kim (2019, p. 458) considers the adoption file as 'an artefact of transnational governmentality' and a technology that 'renders abandoned and relinquished children legally cognisable to the sending and receiving states as "orphans" eligible for transnational adoption emigration.' The papers produced by professionals in the child protection system do not only provide an interesting lens through which we can understand their attitudes and ideas about childhood and parenting, but they also inform us about how first families are constructed in these records. Moreover, these records are credited with the transformative power to legitimise family separations as they enable child welfare professionals to report on the child's social circumstances to authorities and institutions. Some anthropologists have drawn attention to the political and institutional life of these documents (Posocco, 2011; Trundle & Kaplonski, 2011), as they are produced in an institutional setting and a particular political climate about parenting, childhood, and adoption. Despite the richness of these documents, to date, little research has used archives and documents as an object of analysis within Critical Adoption Studies, a few exceptions notwithstanding (Condit-Shrestha, 2021; E. Kim, 2019; Leinaweaver, 2019; Mariner, 2019; Posocco, 2011). Even less attention was paid to the reports and documents, although they are crucial for legitimising the decision to withdraw parental rights. This chapter aims to fill this gap by exploring what I call strategies of 'discursive de-kinning' through reports and documents. For this exploration, I build on the work of Fonseca (2010, 2011) and Höglbacka (2016), who have defined 'de-kinning' as the severing of social and legal ties between the child and (extended) family. By *discursive* de-kinning I refer to how the process of de-kinning takes

place discursively in the paperwork used to legitimise the termination of parental authority. I have examined a large number of social reports and adoption records of 12 Bolivian adoptees who were adopted to the Netherlands between 2007 and 2014 (see Methodology). The records consist of social, psychological, and medical reports written by child protection services, children's homes, or other social organisations responsible for reporting a child considered to be at risk. They also contain legal documents from the family court and the Bolivian Ministry of Justice. I examine how the first parents are being portrayed and described in the adoption records and which underlying discourses and ideologies are being reflected in these files. Analysing the files enabled me to get a better understanding of the social production, description, and reporting of child abandonment, and to question the 'written truths' that the adoption documents seem to convey.

In the following sections, I examine how the documents describe the first families. First, I look at some of the terms used in the adoption documents and discuss how these terms are part of discourses that prevail in child protection institutions. Next, I examine how mothers are presented as irresponsible mothers in order to exclude them (and their families) from possible family reunification. Third, I discuss the social constraints of social investigations. Finally, I address descriptions of the home environment that contain assumptions about race and class.

5.2 Dismantling institutional child protection language

In my examination of the adoption paperwork, I noticed how certain terms were used to describe parents at risk of losing their child to institutionalisation. Two terms recurred in the adoption records and were significant in assessing the social situation of the family: the *biological mother* and *abandonment*.

In most documents examined, mothers were referred to as 'biological mother' (*madre biológica*) or 'progenitor' (*progenitora*). The use of these terms in the social reports is remarkable because when these reports were written, the social enquiry into whether the child was in a risk situation had not yet been completed. However, these terms have the effect of depriving women of their full maternal role and reducing them to their biological role as child-bearers while ignoring their role as nurturers (Myers, 2014). They thus tend to imply a value judgement, and by using them in reports and documents, professionals seem to initiate already the process of discursively decoupling the parents from the child. Anthropologist Kathryn Mariner (2017) made similar observations in her research on the role of social workers in the production of adoptive kinship in the USA. Mariner observed how social workers used a similar strategy. By referring to the pregnant women as 'birth mothers,' they seemed to question their status as mothers in the full meaning of the word

and to limit their role to that of child bearers, even before these women had voluntarily renounced their parental rights. Mariner argues that naming helped prepare pregnant women for the role expected of them in the adoption process, leaving less room for withdrawal or choice of alternative care solutions.

Despite the frequent use of the terms ‘biological mother’ or ‘progenitor’, I also noticed other discursive strategies in the files that I studied. In some cases, the women were referred to by their full names, or in two cases, professionals consistently used the term *señor(a)* together with the parent’s first name in the social reports. These strategies seem to respect the parents more. Linguist Placencia (2001) studied address behaviour by institutional representatives in Bolivian public settings in the early 2000s and observed that the term *señor(a)* had generally been reserved for upper-class people, given the classed and raced history of the country. Drawing from her analysis, might provide an explanation why first mothers are rarely addressed formally in reports and documents, but instead with terms such as biological mother and progenitor.

Another loaded term that I observed was *abandonment*. This term was often used in social reports to describe the child’s social situation in case parents or extended family did not attend the agreed-upon visitation appointments. However, a closer look at the files shows that in many of the cases, the Bolivian parents or family members did not have the intention to ‘abandon’ the child but were temporarily unable to take care of the child. The family members seemed not to be able to retrieve the child from the children’s home within the allotted time, and this was because their economic or social conditions prevented them from doing so (see also next chapter, section 6.4). Sociologist Högbäck (2019, p. 273) critiques the term ‘abandonment’ in prevailing adoption discourses by looking at dictionary definitions. She notes that these definitions contain three meanings: ‘the permanence of a break,’ ‘not caring about someone,’ and ‘withdrawing help or support from someone in need.’ She argues that mothers have been left ‘to their own devices’ by the adoption system, which does not provide them with structural support to keep their children. As a result, Högbäck (2019, *ibid.*) argues that we need to ‘change the perspective from abandoned children to abandoned mothers.’ Abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2015) has coined the term ‘organised abandonment’ to describe when policy decisions deprive impoverished and marginalised communities of necessary support and protection, subjecting them instead to state surveillance and family policing.

A third observation that struck me during my in-depth analysis of the adoption files was the definition of abandonment used in two court documents from 2007 and 2008 on the ‘termination of parental custody’ (*extinción de autoridad paterna y materna*). The definition delimits what is meant by abandonment, which is given as the main reason for severing the legal ties between the child and their parents:

Abandonment is the detachment from the duties of upbringing, feeding, and education, which is imposed by law and not only the irregular fulfilment of the duties resulting from parental authority, in other words, for abandonment to occur,

it is necessary to have a *malicious behaviour* of total neglect and absolute indifference or carelessness for the reality of the children. (court documents from 2007 and 2008, emphasis my own)

This definition comes from the Argentine legal scholar Augusto César Belluscio (2004 [1974], p. 415), who defines child abandonment as ‘malicious behaviour’ that makes the first parents appear ‘careless’ and ‘indifferent.’ It is particularly noteworthy that this definition was used in the court records as there was clearly no malicious behaviour on the part of the parents in these particular cases. In one case, the social reports written by the social worker of the children’s home describe how the mother requested to have her children placed in a home because she herself was suffering from a terminal illness. One report even says, “The biological mother’s last wish is that her daughters will never be separated and always stay together.” This clearly shows that this mother was concerned about the fate of her children before her death. However, the court decision using this definition of abandonment implies that the mother’s behaviour was malicious. In a second case, the social reports describe that the mother disappeared after the death of her husband, leaving the children in the care of the paternal family. This paternal family expressed a deep desire to take care of the children to the social worker but was unable to do so because of their financial situation. Several family members expressed this concern in one of the reports, “The grandmother is very sad that she cannot have the children. [...] All the aunts, uncles and relatives have withdrawn to take care of the children because they are unable to take responsibility due to their economic situation.” Nevertheless, the court document states that “the girls have been abandoned by their biological mother.” The use of the term ‘abandoned’ to frame this situation is thus inappropriate as it disregards the efforts of the family members to find suitable care for their children and/or their desire to continue caring for them. What is more, the court documents only referred to the alleged (lack of) actions of the parents and ignored the social circumstances in which the parents found themselves.

My observation leads me to conclude that in at least these two cases the definition of abandonment as malicious behaviour has been applied while there is no evidence of malicious intent on the part of the family in the social reports. The individual approach seems to blame the parents for the unfortunate conditions they find themselves in and ignores the wider structural conditions that impact the parent’s ability to care for the child (Högbacka, 2016; Roberts, 2022). I noticed that the use of this definition was not limited to the two cases that date back from fifteen years ago, but has also been used in more recent court documents on termination of parental custody in at least three

departments; Santa Cruz (2019)¹, Oruro (2021)² and Chuquisaca (2020).³ This suggests that this definition is still used at the institutional level of the courts to legitimise the termination of parental care by portraying parents as allegedly guilty of ‘malicious behaviour’ and therefore deserving to be separated from their children.

Language and words play an important role in people’s understanding of a social situation. As educationalist Rachel Endo (2021, p. 1) writes, language and terminology are not neutral but ‘have the power to both empower or disempower groups or individuals’ and are thus not free of assumptions and value judgements. Terminology and definitions are often taken for granted by professionals, but the way in which the social situation of marginalised families is described impacts the measures considered necessary to protect children. Social work scholar Gary Clapton (2018) rightly claims that a turn to language in social work practice has the potential to reveal how terminology and definitions shape, justify, and naturalise inequalities. Clapton observed how institutional language can set the agenda for the representation of marginalised families, while at the same time exercising the power of professionals to define social situations as objective truths. My observations align with those of critical race scholar Kit Myers (2014), who notes that the dominant adoption vocabulary naturalises the adoptive family at the expense of the first family, whose realities of loss are discursively downplayed. Myers argues that language is often taken for granted without critical thought about how certain terminologies can subordinate individuals and marginalise their actions. My analysis suggests that the prevailing language used in child protection records contributes to the marginalisation of first families. It shows that the choice of certain words and definitions contributes to discursively initiate the de-kinning process between the child and their first caregivers, which is intended to eventually lead to the permanent severance between the first family and child.

1 Juzgado Público de la Niñez y Adolescencia, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, 9/01/2019 <https://www.edictos.bo/edicto-proceso-de-extincion-de-autoridad-paterna-seguido-por-nair-olivia-castillo-contra-hernan-lopez-cardozo-padre-biologico-del-nino-l-l-c/> (accessed 17/06/2021)

2 Juzgado Público primero en materia niñez y adolescencia de la capital, Oruro, 23, 02, 2021 <https://edictos.organojudicial.gob.bo/Home/Detalle/33097> (accessed 17/06/2021)

3 Juzgado Público mixto de familia y de la niñez y adolescencia de Camargo, Camargo (Chuquisaca), 11/03/2020, <https://edictos.organojudicial.gob.bo/Home/Detalle/13429>, (accessed 17/06/2021)

5.3 ‘Irresponsible mothers’

In this section, I examine the notion of ‘irresponsible mother.’ In two cases this term was used to justify the termination of parental rights. The first case is that of Maribel, a young mother in her twenties of Quechua descent living in a small village in the department of Santa Cruz in the early 2010s. Maribel had worked as a maid for a wealthy family in the neighbourhood, with whom she also lived temporarily with her child. After some time, Maribel decided to work in another town and entrust her son, Eduardo, to the care of her employer. This is not an unusual practice in Bolivia and elsewhere in South America and is referred to as ‘child circulation’ (Fonseca, 1986; Leifsen, 2013; Leinaweaver, 2008; Walmsley, 2008). According to anthropologist Leinaweaver (2007, p. 164), informal fostering is a ‘very long-standing cultural practice in the Andean region’ that takes place in a context of poverty and inequality. Leinaweaver indicates that children can be raised either by relatives, close friends, or by wealthier families. According to these studies, children who end up with the latter are often expected to do some household chores in return for food, clothing, shelter, and education, and are more vulnerable to any form of exploitation or mistreatment (Leinaweaver, 2007; Walmsley, 2008). The arrangement Maribel had chosen for her child is an example of fostering by a more affluent family. It is, unfortunately, also an example of the vulnerability of this kind of arrangement, as Maribel’s child eventually became the victim of child abuse.

At the time Maribel’s two-year-old son was being cared for by her former employer, the local child protection service received complaints from neighbours. They accused Maribel’s ex-employer of child abuse and neglect. After another complaint, the boy was taken from the ex-employer and placed in a children’s home. Shortly afterwards, a social worker from the local child protection service visited the child’s grandmother, Isabela. The social worker wrote down the grandmother’s side of the story in the social report. Isabela eventually got custody of Eduardo, and the boy lived with her and her two daughters while Maribel was still gone. Nevertheless, the social worker wrote a warning in Isabela’s social report.

The grandmother was advised that the child must not become a victim of abuse of any kind. Should the boy experience any ABUSE, the grandmother WILL BE sanctioned. (Social report, 2011, capital letters in original).

Given the boy’s history of abuse and neglect, it seems commendable that child protection services were alert to possible abuse. However, the warning the grandmother received, even though she herself played no part in the previous child abuse by the ex-employer, shows the punitive nature of the Bolivian child protection system. Instead of supporting her, the professional reminded the grandmother of the constant possibility that her grandchild could be taken away from her. It also suggests that the Bolivian child

protection system rather polices and sanctions ‘bad’ (grand)parents than provides them with adequate support and meet their needs. Similarly, Roberts (2002, p. 74) argues that the family-policing system in the USA is not designed to assist parents in taking care of their children but is rather ‘a means to punish parents for their failures by threatening to take their children away.’ Closer to home, in Brazil, first mothers also experienced the child protection system and services as punitive rather than supportive (Fonseca, 2010).

According to subsequent reports of this case, the grandmother requested to have her grandson temporarily re-housed in a children’s home, after the boy had spent several months in the grandmother’s home. The reason for this decision was the grandmother’s weak health and the ex-employer’s threat of taking the child back. In the application for the boy’s readmission to the children’s home, the legal counsel wrote:

Madam Judge, it turns out that the mother of the minor, named Maribel, has a boy who is currently 2 years old, but *the mother is an irresponsible mother* who has no stability [in her life] due to moving from one place to another. (document, 2011, emphasis my own)

It is remarkable that Maribel was described here as ‘irresponsible,’ while the professionals never interviewed her. The file shows that neither the legal advisor nor the social worker(s) were able to locate the mother. Therefore, they were simply unable to hear her side of the story. She was described as ‘irresponsible’ for ‘moving from one place to another,’ which is said to have ultimately led to her disappearing and leaving the child behind. For this reason, the mother is labelled a ‘bad mother’ – while the economic circumstances that led to this informal child transfer are not mentioned. Moreover, it is also overlooked that her solutions for the child are consistent with child circulation practices. On the contrary, they are read as evidence of neglect.

The second case is about Magdalena. Magdalena was made out to be the culprit for the allegedly unstable situation of her two children. She had disappeared from the scene after the death of her husband. Nevertheless, her children were in the care of the extended family when the professionals of the local child protection service intervened. The psychological reports read as follows:

It is recommended that the little sisters can enjoy the right to have a family that provides them with emotional stability, a safe environment, protection, shelter, adequate education, health, and all the parental care they need to guarantee their integral development. Considering the mother’s *careless and irresponsible behaviour*, family reintegration should not occur to ensure the well-being of the girls. (psychological report, 2009, emphasis my own)

Despite the lack of a thorough social investigation to locate and interview the mother, the professional contrasts the children’s need for emotional stability, a safe environment, protection, and parental care with the ‘careless and irresponsible behaviour’ of the

mother. It is striking that the professional in question used the exact words ('careless' and 'irresponsible') as in the definition of abandonment (discussed in the previous section). This shows that the institutional discourse on abandonment as neglect also feeds into the practices of professionals in local child protection services. Moreover, the professional in charge advised that the extended family should not take care of the children either ('they should not be reintegrated into their families'), which resulted in the first family's custody being withdrawn so that the children could put up for adoption.

My reading of Magdalena's and Maribel's documented stories complicates the narrative of irresponsible mothers prevalent in Bolivia. It tends to reveal the punitive and regulatory nature of the Bolivian child protection system. My findings are in line with the observations of other researchers on child protection and adoption practices, which point to the tendency of child protection authorities to first disqualify the parents and families of children who are to be placed for adoption as unfit and unworthy of assuming parental responsibility (Briggs, 2020; Mariner, 2017; Roberts, 2022; Schrover, 2021). This disqualification enables the juxtaposition of the first mother and the adoptive mother in terms of 'good' and 'bad' parenting practices, which plays a vital role in the justification of the removal of the child from their kin, nation and culture (Schrover, 2021). The stigmatising portrayals of first parents thus make them vulnerable to state surveillance — through the family-policing system — and put them at risk of having their children taken away from them (Roberts, 2022). According to childhood historians, the 'bad mother'-trope is not a new phenomenon but dates back to colonial discourses that view racialised and marginalised mothers as unfit for proper parental care (Heynssens, 2017; Jacobs, 2009). This colonial stereotype of bad mothers is still widespread in South American countries. For example, anthropologist Aufseeser (2019) has found that indigenous and impoverished mothers in Peru are often seen through this lens, leading them to be blamed for giving birth to too many children and their poverty. Historian Gallien (2015) noted that in Bolivia many eugenicist discourses were circulating in the early 20th century that portrayed indigenous mothers as unfit and negligent, contrasting them with white middle-class practices of what constituted good motherhood. Anthropologists have shown that poor and indigenous mothers are still measured by Western standards, which means that they, and their extended families, are more likely to be seen as unworthy of parenting (Aufseeser, 2019; Swanson, 2010). Prejudice against first families has negative consequences for them as it makes them more vulnerable to losing their parental rights (see LaBrenz et al., 2022). In both the cases discussed, the children were permanently taken away from their first families.

5.4 The constraints of social investigations

I continue Maribel's story, but in this section, I focus on Maribel's mother, Isabela, who played a central role in the documents discussed. I resume from the moment Isabela requested temporary admission for her grandson. To grant her request, a legal request was made by the legal advisor of the local child protection service. The legal advisor addressed this document to the judge in charge of the case and presented the child's situation as follows:

The grandmother states that she can no longer care for the child and leaves the child in the care facilities of local child protection services. In this sense, the minor Eduardo has no close relatives who can take care of him. He is, I repeat, in a social risk situation because he has no family. It is therefore necessary to refer this minor to your authority so that he may receive the protection of the State and consequently be placed in an institution. (Legal document, August 2011)

Although the document states that the grandmother "can no longer care for the child," it fails to clarify the motives of the request for institutionalisation, nor does it mention the grandmother's intention to place the child in a children's home only temporarily. In addition, the text mentions twice that the boy has "no close relatives" or "no family." These claims lack any evidence of thorough social investigation, including efforts to locate Eduardo's parents or contact members of the extended family who might care for the child.

During the first months that Eduardo was placed in a children's home, a social study was conducted on Isabela, according to a social report. This report shows that a social worker named Miriam, who worked in the children's home where Eduardo was placed, initiated a social study to 'examine the situation of Eduardo's grandmother,' as there was no comprehensive justification as to why he was placed in the home. The social report reflects Miriam's doubts and her curiosity to understand the case better:

When I questioned her [the grandmother] about her decision to hand Eduardo over to the local child protection service, as she herself had applied for the transfer of custody of the child, she replied that one of the motives was that she was afraid of Ms. Fernandez, who is the child's godmother [and Maribel's former employer]. She had threatened to take the child away from her [the grandmother] and repeatedly told the grandmother of her intentions. The other motive was that her illness made it difficult for her to take care of her grandchild, but after the medical treatment of her illness was completed, she would return for her grandson Eduardo to take care of him permanently. (Social report, 2011)

The social worker describes the grandmother's various motivations for placing Eduardo in a children's home and even adds that the grandmother wants to "take care of him

permanently.” This case will be further explored in the next chapter through Isabela’s testimony (Chapter 6, section 6.4). The social report also shows that Miriam helped Isabela start the family reunification process. She described that they both exchanged phone numbers and made an agreement that the grandmother would visit Eduardo at the children’s home in Santa Cruz de la Sierra.

This social report also reflects how committed the social worker was, which becomes clear in the following excerpt from the report:

After inquiring with the neighbours, I knocked again on Mrs Isabela’s door, as apparently no one was at home [earlier that day], but after an hour she came out and answered me herself. (Social report, 2011)

The social worker described how she had spent an hour in Isabela’s neighbourhood talking to the neighbours while waiting for her to come home. It is important to mention that the round trip from the children’s home in Santa Cruz de la Sierra to the village where Isabela lives takes about seven hours. The journey must have taken her a whole day, which is undeniably a considerable effort. However, not all social workers are in a position to make such an effort. It depends on one’s own commitment and on the possibilities of the institutions in which one works. Financial resources play an important role, which can lead to differences in the thoroughness with which cases are handled. In Isabela’s case, the social worker received logistical support from the children’s home where Eduardo resided, a Christian private children’s home founded by an adoptive couple from the United States who had adopted a child in 2005. In an interview with social worker Brenda, who had worked in both a private and a public children’s home in La Paz,⁴ I asked her what the biggest difference was between the two types of children’s homes, to which she replied:

The resources. Because the resources of state-run children’s homes are limited. [...] At the *Hogar Villegas* [a private children’s home], I had all the papers. I had enough money to make photocopies. They gave me the van so I could look for a child’s house or go to the place where the child had been abandoned. I could visit and talk to the neighbours... but there are no resources in state-run children’s homes. If you want to do a social investigation, and a good investigation, you have to do it with your own money. In those cases, I had to pay for my ticket, I had to use my own photocopier, and I had to use my own money.

It is clear that this lack of resources is to the disadvantage of families who live in remote areas, several hours away from the bigger cities. Social workers constrained by the limited

⁴ In this dissertation I use the terms ‘public children’s home’ and ‘private children’s homes.’ However, to be correct, both types of children’s homes are under supervision of a controlling body (SEDEGES). The difference is that the ‘private’ homes have their own staff, while ‘public homes’ are staffed by employees of the SEDEGES.

financial and technical resources of the children's home are thus limited in conducting a good social investigation. They might miss the opportunity to locate parent(s) and/or relatives, and thus miss out on a possible family reunion. This finding was also found in a national study on children at risk of losing parental care in Bolivia (IICC and Aldeas Infantiles SOS, 2017). Study reported that less than 50% of private and public children's homes conduct social investigations to look for extended families and found that, as a result, institutionalisation is often the first response for children who can no longer stay with their parents (*ibid.*, p.153). Participants in the study, employed in children's homes, attributed these problems to coordination between local child protection services and the courts, combined with a lack of human, financial and technical resources. The study also observed how public and private children's homes differ, with the latter having more resources to carry out social investigations, as was evident in Brenda's testimony.

5.5 Inadequate housing

In various adoption documents, I have seen that home visits were often carried out to examine the possibility of family reintegration. Some files also contain a home study on the environment of the (extended) family, written by the respective social worker in charge of the case. Home visits are part of the family-policing system and are carried out to assess the social environment of the children. These social screenings are also used to assess whether or not to remove the children from their families.⁵ The criteria by which families are deemed suitable are never neutral. Instead, they are shaped by the prevailing discourses and ideologies that emerge from historical and global representations of what is considered good parenting and child-rearing practice, which include what is considered a suitable home environment. In this section, I examine the cases where family reintegration was rejected with reference to the home environment. I trace the ideologically laden assumptions found in the social reports of the children's social environment.

In the case of Magdalena, a social investigation was conducted to determine whether the children could stay in the homes of the extended family in the peri-urban town where they lived. The social report briefly describes various relatives of the children with their names, date of birth, place of birth, and level of education. Additionally, the report discusses the family dynamics and describes which family member has taken over the

⁵ Prospective adoptive parents are also subject to home screenings to assess the suitability and quality of living standards as part of their transnational adoption process (see Leinaweaver et al., 2017; Mariner, 2017).

parental role for the orphaned children and the socio-economic situation of the other family members. It also describes how the children came under state supervision and were subsequently placed in a children's home. I have focused specifically on the section 'objective report' (*relato objetivo*), in which the caseworker reports on the village where the family lives and the material conditions in which they live:

The family members live in their own house. The house is built with a motacú roof, mud walls, the floor is made of earth, they cook with firewood, the toilet is a well, this house has electric light and drinking water. The inside of the house has no furniture. (Social report, 2009)

What stands out in this description is the reference to the natural materials used to build the house. Several anthropologists who have studied racial inequalities in Andean countries such as Bolivia have argued that racial identities are often intertwined with their relationship to the earth and nature (Canessa, 2012; Orlove, 1998; Weismantel, 2001). In particular, Orlove (1998) discusses how the use of earth objects and materials affects how people are perceived along race and class. He argues that proximity to the earth is seen as a sign of inferiority according to racial classifications in the Andes. Following his analysis, the materials described in the report — the motacú roof, the mud walls and the earthen floor — are associated with 'backwardness', 'lack of progress', and 'Indianness' (Orlove, 1998, p. 217). One might wonder whether a description of the materials of the house would be given if the family lived in a middle- or upper-class home (Roberts, 2002). Van Vleet's (2009) study on informal adoption practices in Bolivia also shows that Bolivians in rural and indigenous communities are reluctant to state intervention due to the long history of oppression by these authorities. Van Vleet therefore notes that these communities prefer to avoid state intervention and assessments because they know that they could be discriminated against due to their different living standards and practices. In view of this, we can state that the household described was considered inferior compared to middle-class and urban homes.

The report evaluates the family's home environment negatively and speaks of "housing problems." It describes the house as being in a "humble condition" and repeats the building materials used. This description suggests that the house is deemed unsuitable for raising children, implying that middle-class urban houses are the norm. Subsequently, the same report concludes, "the family members do not have sufficient financial means to adequately care for the children in their recovery process." The extended family members are thus considered 'unfit' for family reintegration, not because their nurturing skills are questioned but because of their lack of resources, allegedly evidenced by the material state of the home.

In the records of Roberto, the social worker described the situation of this single father of two children at risk of losing parental authority to the child protection system in 2009. His children were in the care of his ex-wife at the time when they were found in a state

of neglect and placed in a children's home. According to the social report, the father requested the initiation of family reintegration proceedings. A social investigation was conducted to assess the father's socio-economic conditions, with particular attention to the home environment. The report describes that Roberto had divorced his wife three years earlier and was living in the city with his sister and her children at the time of the social investigation. The social worker noted during her visit that the father "does not seem to have a home" and that "he finds shelter here and there." The social worker also found that the father lived in precarious financial circumstances, worked from 7 am to 10 pm, which left him little time to look after the children, and consumed excessive amounts of alcohol. The report also contains a brief description of the home environment:

The house is a wooden room where we observed two beds, a table, and a small kitchen. They have neither a bathroom nor drinking water. However, they do have electricity. Six children and their mother [Roberto's sister] and Roberto's two daughters, live in the house. The place does not provide the conditions for the proper development of the girls and they are exposed to all the dangers that exist at home. (Social report, 2009)

This extract provides a brief description of the domestic environment, the furniture present, the (lack of) utilities, and highlights the number of children and adults living in the house, which is described in the report as a "wooden room." It also mentions the lack of drinking water and a toilet. In Magdalena's records, reference was also made to the sanitary conditions of the home ("the toilet is a well"). The lack of sanitation in impoverished families is a larger structural problem in Bolivian society. For example, in 2008, only 37,1 % of people in rural areas had access to basic sanitation and 48,4% in urban areas (UDAPE, 2010, p. 121). Given these figures, it is not surprising that many impoverished families do not have sanitation facilities. It then seems unfair that the lack of sanitation is used as an argument against reunification. The social worker's evaluation of the home is based on middle-class family ideals as a standard for the assessment. The professional evaluated the home as an unsafe environment and concludes the home "does not provide the conditions for the proper development" of the children.

The social report also mentions that the social worker requested a second visit. However, the father refused because his sister no longer wanted child protection professionals to visit her house because "she is afraid that her six children will be taken away from her," according to the report. The fear of the sister reveals her attitude towards the child protection system, in which her brother and his daughters are already under surveillance, and makes her aware of the potential consequences of being caught in this system and thus being subject to state monitoring. The report mentions how Roberto finally panics when he realises that he could lose parental custody of his children:

In the interview with Mr. Roberto, he is aggressive and says: 'No one is going to take my daughters away from me because I will get my friends and I will get my

daughters out of this place [children's home], even if it is by force.' (Social report, 2009).

The social worker describes how she experienced the father as aggressive and threatening during her visit. However, from the father's perspective, one can read his desperation where he absolutely does not want his daughters to be taken away from him ("No one will take my daughters away from me"). His threat of violence can be seen as the result of his powerlessness in the face of a mechanism that will eventually make him permanently lose parental authority over his children. Similarly, in another case, a social worker wrote down her impressions of her contact with the parents of their two institutionalised children. She writes, "We also feared that they would take the children away without the permission of the children's home" (Social report, 2012). I also found other examples that describe the negative attitude of the families under scrutiny. In one file, a social worker tried unsuccessfully to contact an uncle who had previously requested family reintegration for his sister's institutionalised children. The record states that "the uncle has so far refused to contact the assigned social worker (court document, 2007). In my conversations with some of the first families, I was also told how the child welfare professionals disqualified their living conditions and therefore assessed them negatively to be eligible for family reintegration (see the story of Catarina, next Chapter, section 6.3). These accounts seem to echo how first families perceive the intervention of the child protection system as threatening instead of supporting. This also perpetuates Roberts' (2022) claim that the family-policing system does not necessarily protect families but separates them.

Although the home evaluation of Roberto played a significant role, other criteria were also considered in the evaluation of Roberto's ability to provide a stable home for his children. The father was eventually deprived of his parental rights. However, the final decision was made based on the lack of a document that proved that he was legally related to the children. Another social report describes Roberto as having no identity papers (birth certificate, identity card), which proves his marginal position in Bolivian society. In Magdalena's case, the children were also not reunited with their extended family as they were presented as a 'disintegrated family,' and the children were also declared adoptable. These accounts suggest that poverty, lack of resources and precarious living conditions play a crucial role in decisions to terminate parental authority. According to Aldeas Infantiles SOS (2011), of Bolivian children at risk of losing parental care, or who have already lost it, 58% live in poverty and 22% in extreme poverty, which is reflected in the lack of basic services, education, health and quality of life. This shows that poor and marginalised families are more likely to be policed by the child protection system in Bolivia, and that parental unsuitability is all too often confused with the material conditions that the families find themselves in, which are the result of histories of deprivation and discrimination.

5.6 Final thoughts

The aim of this chapter was to shed new light on the promise of adoption documents to be objective assessments and to unravel the dominant narratives circulating in the field of child protection and adoption in Bolivia. In doing so, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the processes of unmaking of families. These processes serve as a mechanism of de-kinning that prepares children to end up in (transnational) adoption circuits. My aim was to deconstruct the discourses and ideologies contained in these written reports and documents. I suggest that middle- and upper-class values are hidden in the way first families are evaluated and described. Through several examples, I showed how first parents are discursively made 'unfit' for the role of parents. This discursive de-kinning supports other mechanisms that portray the first family members negatively, eventually leading to the termination of parental rights. Furthermore, the empirical data suggests that the Bolivian child protection system also has a punitive and regulatory character, in which poor and marginalised families are more easily placed under state supervision. The poor conditions they live in are then used to support claims about their unsuitability as child carers. This has led impoverished families to experience the child protection system as threatening rather than supportive, as they risk having their children taken away. Several national studies have shown that the Bolivian child protection system is fragile and children are therefore more easily placed in institutions rather than reunited with their families (Aldeas Infantiles SOS, 2011; IICC and Aldeas Infantiles SOS, 2017). This and my findings suggest that the Bolivian child protection system is basically a family-policing system, where impoverished and marginalised families are monitored and policed rather than supported and protected (Roberts, 2022).

My study may contribute to the larger scholarly debates about power relations in documents and archives that draw attention to who is being written about and who the author is. In colonial archives and documents in particular, historians point out that subaltern voices are often erased, meaning that histories have been written in a one-sided way (Basu & De Jong, 2016; Stoler, 2009). In parallel, the adoption records that I studied are part of a larger system that facilitates the child removal, displacement, and institutionalisation of children, in this case prepared by professionals from the family-policing system, which also has its roots in the colonial histories of child separation and controlling racialised families (Briggs, 2020; Roberts, 2022). As Van Van Vleet (2009, p. 31) remarks, 'documents have historically been used to take advantage of, rather than support, indigenous peoples and communities in the Andean region.' It was my intention to draw attention to the voices of the first parents and other first family members that shine through in the documents.

Chapter 6

Complicating legal adoption stories through the narratives of first families

6.1 Introduction

In February 2021, a government-appointed commission presented a critical report, containing the findings of a nearly two-year investigation into transnational adoption abuses in the Netherlands (Commissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie, 2021b). The report thoroughly analysed five transnational adoption circuits from 1967 to 1998.¹ In addition, a systematic analysis of 18 other transnational adoption circuits was carried out from 1998 to the present, i.e., during the period when the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption was in force (ibid.). The main conclusion of this devastating report shows the structural failure of the transnational adoption system, both in the past and in current practice, which led the committee to propose a suspension of transnational adoption in the Netherlands.² The then Minister of Legal Protection, Sander Dekker, followed this recommendation and announced a moratorium on transnational adoption procedures with immediate effect (Rijksoverheid, 2021). This was followed by a stream of numerous reactions, in which various adoption agencies strongly emphasised that abuses no longer exist in the current transnational adoption system (Trouw, 2021). Karin Verschueren, the then coordinator of the Dutch Central Adoption Authority, also stated that no abuses had been identified within the existing legal framework after 2008 (Tweede

1 It concerns the adoption circuits between the Netherlands and the following countries of origins: Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka

2 In the press release of the COIA (2021, 8 February) the committee states that ‘the system of intercountry adoption is still open to fraud and abuses continue to this day’ and ‘has serious doubts’ if an alternative adoption system might eliminate adoption abuses, leading to the recommendation of a suspension of transnational adoption.

Kamer, 2021). She explained that the central authority carefully examines adoption documents following the HCIA guidelines and standards. However, during my previous work experience as a staff member of a central authority, I experienced that central authorities and adoption agencies in demanding countries rely mainly on the paperwork received from partner institutions in supply countries. These records are often the primary source to check for discrepancies and errors, and to assess a child's eligibility for adoption. As Loibl (2019b) has already noted, external scrutiny and review under the HCIA is limited due to the trust principle underpinning these transnational intergovernmental arrangements. In the previous chapter, I have already discussed how this paperwork seems to serve the de-kinning of first families, and the making children ready for the adoption market. This chapter shows that adoption documents contain various assumptions about the first family, which calls into question the reliability of these documents. Moreover, as a central authority staff member, I experienced that we had to rely on paperwork to verify the legitimacy of adoption cases. If additional questions arose, we had to contact the responsible adoption agency, which in turn checked with the partner organisation in the supply country. This made me realise that the whole process was based on the assessment of the child welfare professionals in the supply countries, and that there was no independent control. This was another reason that made me question Verschueren's claims. It became clear to me that the voices of the first families are not sufficiently heard in this process and that their perspectives need to be made audible.

First parents and kin are rarely asked how they experienced the relinquishment and adoption process. The nature of closed adoptions, widespread in Latin America, has rendered them invisible. Jodi Kim (2009) describes first mothers as 'socially dead,' as these women no longer legally exist for the child they once mothered. It could be argued that the social death of first parents and kin is a side effect of the adoption system that serves the interests of the other parties involved while masking the violence and irregularities that take place beneath the surface (see also H. Kim, 2016). I am therefore interested in bringing the perspectives of first families to the fore. In doing so, I question whether closed adoptions open the door to coercive practices in official adoption procedures.

I deliberately use the term first *families* because the stories presented are not limited to the accounts of the first parents. Most of the little academic research that has been done on first parents has focused exclusively on first mothers (e.g. Bos, 2007; Högbäck, 2016; H. Kim, 2016). While the first mothers slowly gain visibility in research, the other family members and caregivers still often remain invisible (Salvo Agoglia & Herrera, 2020). Some scholars have even argued that the exclusive focus on first parents at the expense of wider families results from dominant white, middle-class parenting ideologies while ignoring the role of larger kinship networks (Landers, Danes, & White Hawk, 2015). This chapter focuses on three case studies, each story told from the perspective of a father, aunt, and grandmother. All three recount their encounters with officials of the

Bolivian child protection system over a period from 2008 to 2012. The three cases were chosen because each highlights a different part of the child protection system and all three have had different experiences with officials. Contact with the relatives was established as part of first-family searches, which enabled me to talk to a total of 18 first parents and relatives (see also Methodology). It is important to mention that the testimonies are only snapshots of a particular moment, notably when I encountered the family in question as part of a first-family search.

In this chapter, I explore how the testimonies of these family members complicate the official adoption stories written in the adoption records. It follows the previous chapter in which I argued that discourses and ideologies of gender, race and class shine through in the social reports and adoption documents, seeping into the 'objective' description of families facing the loss of parental care. The voices of first family members point to the policing nature of the child protection system in Bolivia and how this system tears families apart in the name of child protection when this could have been avoided. Moreover, their voices complement and dismantle the written adoption stories described in the adoption file, undermining the prevailing logics and myths of the global adoption system. I begin with the story of a first father about how he and his wife were persuaded to give up their child for adoption. Then I tell the story of a first aunt and how the intervention of a social worker tore her family apart. The last case is about a grandmother and how she lost custody of her grandson.

6.2 The story of Tomás

In December 2018, I conducted a first-family search in the department of Santa Cruz. In preparation, I had received the paperwork of an adoption that took place less than a decade earlier. These records included the name of a small village and the names of the first parents and siblings. The village was in the far east of Bolivia, in the Chiquitania region, a nine-hour drive from the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Once I arrived, I began the search by asking in local shops if anyone knew the family in question, pretending to be a distant relative. However, many villagers did not know the family in question, only one photographer had a photo of one of the siblings in his computer archive. Nevertheless, many villagers urged me to go to the local radio station. They broadcast my call, and within minutes I received a call from Tomás, the father himself. With some suspicion, he asked why I was looking for his family. I briefly explained that his adopted daughter was adopted abroad, and she wished contact with his Bolivian family. I suggested we meet in person to explain the whole story, and we agreed to meet in the town square at 7:30 am the next day.

6.2.1 “There is a lawyer that wants to adopt your daughter”

The following day, I met Tomás, a peasant in his forties, in front of the church in the town square. He was accompanied by his wife, his eldest son of 27 and the wife’s brother, who happens to be a police officer. The parents told me they were surprised to learn their child had been adopted abroad. They thought that the child had been adopted within Bolivia and wanted to make sure that my story was true and asked me to go to the police station with the father and the police officer. To gain the parents’ trust, I agreed, although I was completely surprised by this turn of events. At the police station, Tomás expressed his concern to another police officer who came by. Tomás said, “What I want to know is if this is a case of kidnapping or not because some people come with lies and tricks, and that is what I would like to prevent. I want to know that what he says is true. I want to know if my daughter is abroad.” During the interrogation, the father explained that his daughter was born with a severe medical condition, and he and his wife decided to give the child up for adoption. Nevertheless, Tomás was convinced that his daughter had been adopted in Bolivia and told of a conversation he had had with a social worker from the local child protection service:

The social worker told me, “Well, we know you do not have the resources... and your little daughter (*hijita*) will need at least some time to recover. Besides, the treatment will cost something. She asked me, “Listen to me, how many children do you have?” I replied, “I have seven children.” She said, “Okay,” and made some notes. Later she told me, “There is a lawyer (*doctora*) in Santa Cruz who wants to adopt your daughter.” She said, “Listen, you can bring your child home, but what will happen then? Do you have electricity in your whole house?” I replied, “No, I do not”. She then said, “Look, the girl is in a bad condition. The girl deserves attention and the lawyer has no children. She wants to take care of your daughter and accept her as her daughter. What do you think? She can give what the girl needs.” I agreed. My wife and I then signed a document to give our daughter up for adoption.

At this point, I understood the father’s concerns much better. For ten years, he and his family believed that a lawyer in Santa Cruz de la Sierra had adopted his child. The social worker in charge had convinced them to opt for adoption by juxtaposing their living conditions with the child’s needs and implying that the child deserved better. In the quote, the father points out the contrasting differences: having seven children versus being childless; being a peasant versus being a lawyer; living in a house without electricity versus living in a house with all utilities; living in a rural village versus living in a big city. Through the questions the social worker asked him, he was conscious of his precarious situation, and he realised that the child would be better off in an affluent adoptive family. The contrast presented here reflects the findings of many scholars on how aware indigenous and rural people are of the fact that their living conditions are considered subordinate to those of middle-class families in urban areas (Canessa, 2012; Van Vleet,

2009; Weismantel, 2001). Further in the conversation, the father asked me if his daughter lived in a more affluent environment and family, “Where my daughter is now, it must be rich? The *señor* is rich, right?” This question illustrates that the father is fully cognizant that a wealthier family in a wealthier nation is now taking care of his daughter, but also shows that he is eager to know whether the decision to give his daughter up for adoption has led to in a socially better position, in a wealthier and more privileged adoptive family. Similar findings were observed by Högbäck (2012) in her study of South African first mothers, who were well aware of the unequal power relations behind the adoption system. It is precisely this unequal power dynamic that privileges certain parents over others.

The father’s distrust, however, was mainly motivated by the incongruity between my story and the one he had been told at the time. The social worker had apparently misled the parents with false information about the prospective adopter, even though practices involving the promise of a child to prospective parents are prohibited by both local and international laws and conventions to prevent illegal adoptions. Had the Bolivian parents been properly informed of the adoption process, they would have known that the child would become a ward of the state and fall under the supervision of the child protection system, prior to be assigned to prospective adoptive parents. However, in the conversation with the father, he stated that he was not informed of the implications of adoption, “No, they did not explain any of that to me. Nothing.” This allowed the social worker to tell the story of an imaginary childless woman in order to convince the parents to sign away their parental rights so that the child could be assigned to a wealthier family. Criminologist Loibl (2019a) identifies this form of deception as a coercive practice where vulnerable parents are given false information to consent for adoption, fuelled by a strong belief that this is in the child’s best interest to grow up elsewhere. My claim that his daughter lived abroad obviously came as a shock to the father, who wanted to verify my story, and wanted to know whether they had become the victim of foreign practices of child trafficking. When the adoption of his daughter took place in the late 2000s, various adoption scandals were reported in the Bolivian press (see also Van Vleet, 2009). These scandals led to a temporary moratorium on transnational adoption procedures in several Bolivian departments in 2007.³

3 As of 2007, a moratorium on transnational adoption was imposed. As a result, adoptions were temporarily suspended until legislation and monitoring bodies were updated. As a result, in some departments (e.g., La Paz) transnational adoptions were not possible, while in other departments (e.g., Cochabamba, Santa Cruz de la Sierra) adoptions continued. As of 2015, with the introduction of the new Code for Children and Adolescents, this ban was lifted and all departments were again involved in transnational adoptions.

6.2.2 The coercive character of freely given consent

As our conversation continued, the father briefly explained the situation that made him 'choose' to give up his daughter for adoption. Tomás explains:

Ten years ago, my baby was born. Well, let us say the baby was born with a defect. I took her to the village hospital, but they could not cure her there. They sent her to a hospital in Santa Cruz. I accompanied the baby because the mother could not leave the bed several days after the birth. After five days in Santa Cruz, I ran out of money. I had no money, so I asked permission from the hospital to return to my village to get more money. When I returned to the village, I looked for money and returned to the hospital in Santa Cruz after three days. There I could no longer find her in the ward where he was lying. I asked the nurses what had happened. They told me, "She has been transferred to *neunato* [sic.]" I did not understand this word and I was without family in the city. They told me, "You can better return to your village." I returned to my village and here I heard that the local child protection service was looking for me. The social worker of the service said to me, "Do you have the resources to take care of the child? Because she was born with a medical condition."

The father's summary of the events shows how multiple elements were intertwined and influenced the adoption decision. Tomás' testimony shows the arduous journey he had to undertake from his rural village to the hospital in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, the department's capital. This journey, which could take up to nine hours depending on the mode of transportation (bus, minivan, car), also required him to find accommodation in the city. In addition, the father explained that he was forced to return to his village after a few days because he was running out of money. When he later returned to Santa Cruz de la Sierra, he could not find his daughter in the hospital. He was told that the baby had been transferred to another ward, but he could not understand the word 'neonatology' and could thus not find his daughter. The quote shows that the father lacked support or direction in the whole process of his daughter being hospitalised in the far away city ("I was without family"). As anthropologists working in Bolivia have observed, indigenous and rural people from the countryside often encounter difficulties when they arrive in the big cities and have to find their way around the administration, the bureaucracy and its institutions (Ellison, 2017; Placencia, 2001). All these factors combined placed the parents in a vulnerable position in the global arena of stratified reproduction (Colen, 1995; Högbäck, 2012). These factors severely limit the reproductive choices of people in vulnerable positions. This forces us to question concepts such as 'choice,' 'consent,' and 'voluntary relinquishment' that are routinely used by adoption authorities. In the case of Tomás, there was a document in the adoption papers stating that the parents had given their 'consent' to relinquish their daughter. The declaration contains a brief summary of the parents' motivations:

The parents explained that, given their poor economic situation, they were unable to provide the child with the medical care she needed because of her physical problems. Therefore, they decided to give their daughter to the children's home so that the child protection system could determine their daughter's future. The parents wanted to stress that they made this decision because of their poor economic situation and the fact that they had to care for six other children. (Document, 2008)

Notably, this declaration to relinquish the child emphasises that this decision was made because of the “poor economic situation” of the parents, as this is in stark contrast to official discourses that poverty should not be a reason for adoption. For example, the United Nations General Assembly (2010) introduced Guidelines for Alternative Care of Children, which state that ‘financial and material poverty should never be the only justification for the removal of a child from parental care, for receiving a child into alternative care, or for preventing his/her reintegration’ (§15). Nevertheless, many professionals and experts on adoption note that poverty is often the main reason why children end up in adoption circuits (Fuentes, Boéchat, & Northcott, 2012; Högbäck, 2019; Leinaweaver, 2007). Thus, poverty forces parents to ‘voluntarily’ give their child up for adoption and is interpreted as an individual ‘choice,’ which makes this practice acceptable despite the aforementioned guidelines. During my conversation with Tomás, I asked him whether he agreed to give his daughter up for adoption. He replied to me:

Of course I have agreed to it. I signed the papers at the local child protection service. The surrender is documented, but it's not what I would have wanted because who gives away their child? Nobody gives away their daughter just like that. It was because of the problems we had.

The father's statement illustrates that adoption was not his preferred choice (“it's not what I would have wanted”). Nevertheless, The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption (1993, Article 4) and Bolivian Code for Children and Adolescents (2014, Article 48) attach great value to freely given consent. Högbäck (2016, p. 236) criticises choice-based thinking in transnational adoption. She contends that national and international conventions and laws attempt to prevent abuses and irregularities in adoption procedures while ignoring the wider social inequalities that structure child relinquishment. This often results in the following logic: ‘if no fraud is present, adoptions are just by definition’ (Högbäck, 2016, p. *ibid.*) Högbäck goes on to explain that such a line of thought legitimises oppressive circumstances as well as a system of global inequalities and lack of support for parents who want to keep their children. She argues that professionals often see parents' consent as their own decision, justifying and legitimising adoption. Högbäck (2016, p. *ibid.*) concludes that ‘the legitimising rhetoric of choice thus conceals this darker side of adoption.’ Similarly, Coutin, Maurer, and Yngvesson (2002, p. 826) have noted that the ‘transformation of coercion into choice’ is

made possible by decontextualising the actions and decisions of first parents, who are being trapped in local and global social structures.

6.3 The story of Catarina

In February 2021, with Pamela, the research assistant, I undertook a first-family search in a small village two hours away from the capital of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. This time we were not looking for the father or mother but for the extended family mentioned in the adoption papers. The father had died barely a year after the children's birth, and the mother had disappeared from the scene six months later. As a result, paternal family members who lived nearby were approached by professionals in the child protection system, and these encounters were then described in the social reports. While looking through the adoption papers, I found a hand-drawn map of the village centre, on which the paternal grandparents' house was marked. So, when Pamela and I arrived in the village on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, we followed the map, and within 10 minutes we were standing in front of the grandparents' house. At that moment, a man on his bicycle stopped near the house and opened the gate to enter the property. We asked him if the [surname] family lived there, and he answered in the affirmative and kindly led us to the other family members. Further back in the garden, several family members sat together and chatted a bit when they saw us approaching them. Pamela and I briefly presented ourselves and came straight to the point. I said we were here on behalf of two adopted girls, eager to know their relatives. At the same time, I showed several photos of the girls from the time of adoption until today. Immediately many emotions arose among the family members. A woman introduced herself as Catarina, one of the girls' aunts. She was in tears and spontaneously told us that these girls were her nieces. We reassured her that the girls are doing well and are staying with an adoptive family in the Netherlands. Then the aunt took us to her house and drummed up other family members to report that there was news about the girls. We sat in the garden at a small table with her sister Ursula, and a good dozen family members sat in a circle around us, including the girls' brother. The family was very hospitable and offered us soda and fresh rice bread while we told our story. Then they told us how the adoption came about, already 13 years earlier in 2008.

6.3.1 Removing children because of poverty

During the conversation, Catarina in particular, spoke up. She said with sadness in her voice that the family had "a difficult life" with limited financial and material resources.

Catarina explained that Reynaldo, the father, was barely making ends meet and was unemployed when the girls were born as twins. Nevertheless, Catarina described him as a hard-working man who wanted the best for his family. The mother, Miranda, was described as a quiet, caring, and loving woman who was illiterate and mainly took care of the upbringing of the five children. Catarina explained that, just before Reynaldo passed away, he had asked two of his sisters to look after his five children. He did this not to burden Miranda with caring for all their children. Catarina looked after the two eldest children of four and five years, while her sister Bianca looked after the three younger children of ten months and two years (the twins). With Reynaldo's sisters taking care of the children, Miranda continued to be present in their lives. When Miranda took the twins to a rehabilitation centre for malnourished children, she did not pick them up when she was expected to. From then on, the local child protection service was informed, and the children were temporarily placed in a children's home. The children continued to receive regular visits from the mother, who returned, and various family members. When Miranda disappeared with her youngest daughter, and thus no longer visited the children's home, a social worker approached the extended family from the local child protection service. Especially the two sisters, Catarina and Bianca, were targeted by the professional because the sisters had taken over the care of Miranda's children. As a result, their family situation and home environment were scrutinised by the social worker. Catarina told us: "They came to see how we lived." She went on to explain how the social worker concluded that she and Bianca did not meet the requirements for caring for the girls because the social worker found that they were living in poor conditions. In telling the story, Catarina's voice showed a lot of emotion and anger:

The social worker said to me, "You do not have the resources to raise the children." I told her, "You know, I had six children and never asked anyone for a loaf of bread." (...) I told her, "Ask if my children go to another house to ask for food." (...) I said, "I do not live in a luxurious house, but at least my children are growing up in their own house. They do not bother anyone. So, you have no reason to say that I cannot care for the children." (...) She was walking around with her roll of paper. She said, "You do not have the conditions. The children cannot live like that." This made me so angry. (...) You should have seen how bold this authority was just because she was an authority. How can she just come and say, "No, these children have to go because you do not have the conditions to have them." (...) My brother got angry and told her, "In the poverty we live in, this is how we could raise them and get the girls ahead, but do not take them away." But she did not understand (angry voice).

In the perception of Catarina and her siblings, the social worker disrupted their lives by stating they were too poor to raise the girls ("You don't have the resources"). Catarina's testimony illustrates the asymmetrical power relationship between her family and the social worker, whom she repeatedly referred to as an "authority" with "her roll of paper." The family risked losing the two children because the social worker claimed multiple

times that they did not have the resources to raise them. This is remarkable because, as stated in the previous section, poverty should not be the reason for removing children from their families. The Bolivian Code for Children and Adolescents of 1999 (Art. 29), under which the adoption took place, states that ‘the lack of material and economic resources does not constitute grounds for loss or suspension of parental authority.’⁴ As I discussed in the previous chapter, a lack of material resources due to poverty is often interpreted as neglect, which puts the parents at risk of losing their children. Catarina’s testimony confirms these findings by claiming the social worker disqualified her poor living conditions. In Catarina’s retelling of the event, she expressed that she was wronged by the social worker (“You have no reason to say that I cannot take care of the children”). From her point of view, she had sufficient means to vouch for the care and upbringing of the children, as she had previously raised her own children without problems (“at least my children are growing up in their own house”). As the conversation continues, Catarina explained that the social worker would still not leave her alone after the two girls were institutionalised and threatened to take her deceased brother’s other children, Elsa and Denis. However, this time, Catarina prevented this by intervening in time and involving a third party. This led to another social investigation conducted by a different social worker. This time Catarina’s domestic situation was assessed positively.

6.3.2 “We did not want to give them up for adoption”

The adoption papers contain a voluntary declaration signed by Bianca, one of Catarina’s sisters, stating the following:

The declarant states that she is addressing the court to say that she had initially decided to take the girls from the children’s home, but due to her economic situation and her daughter’s illness, she cannot keep the twins. For this reason, she had spoken to her six sisters and two brothers, who decided that they will not take the girls from the children’s home but want a better future for them and give them up for adoption. (Voluntary declaration, 2008)

This voluntary declaration suggests that Bianca and her siblings decided it would be better to give up the girls for adoption so they could have a better future. While the legitimacy of adoption papers containing a voluntary declaration is rarely questioned in supply and demand countries, my conversation with the relatives gives a different version of what happened. Catarina stated:

⁴ The recent Code for Children and Adolescents of 2014 (Art. 37, §2) also contains the same premise.

One day, when I came back from work, there was a van. Me and my elder brother went to the van. My brother said, “I will not sign for you to sell you my nieces.” I also said, “I will not sign anything.” (...) They told us that they would take the girls against our will... because we did not have the means to raise them. (...) I did not want to sign. My brother did not want to sign. (...) We did not want to give them up for adoption. They told us that they would take the girls away from us against our will. (...) One of the women from the government came and threatened my sister. Each time the woman went to my sister. She even told my sister that she would go to prison if she did not sign the paper. Every time she came around, she argued with my sister. So my sister had no choice. I mean, she was forced to sign. The woman forced my sister to sign the papers.

Catarina described that she and her family tried multiple times to go against the social worker by not signing the voluntary declaration. None of the family members did want to give up the children for adoption. Here it is interesting to reflect for a moment on how even the term ‘sell’ (*vender*) was used (“I will not sign for you to sell my nieces”). Catarina did not see adoption as a child protection measure or care alternative, but perceived it as commodification and sale by state authorities. The significant power imbalance and hierarchical relationship between state officials and ordinary citizens in Bolivia has led to a high perception of corruption within state organisations and institutions (Neudorfer, 2015). Catarina’s perception can be located in this, as the family suffers from the injustice done to them by the social worker (who is considered “an authority” as described in the previous section). The closed nature of adoption in Bolivia prohibits the family from receiving information about the children, reinforcing the distrust of adoption. Next, it was only when the social worker threatened the family members that Bianca felt obliged to sign the paperwork. Bianca’s sister Ursula phrased it, “whether she signed or not, they still wanted to take the girls, and then they wanted to give them up for adoption.” The threats and pressure the sisters experienced from the social worker could be described as ‘child laundering’ (Smolin, 2006), meaning that ‘the illicit aspects of the case would remain hidden under the legitimating veil of legal adoption’ (p.117). In the official version of the adoption story, no rights had been violated, which enabled the adoption to be seen as legitimate by professionals and authorities on both the supply and demand sides of the transnational adoption system. The voices of first family members, however, undermine this official narrative.

6.4 The story of Isabela

In December 2020, I travelled to the department of Santa Cruz with Mayerlin, the research assistant. This time we had to search for a first family living in a village four hours away from the department's capital. We were looking for Isabela, whom I already introduced in the previous chapter when I discussed the record about her and Maribel, Isabela's daughter. In 2020 Isabela was in her fifties. We were looking for her as she was mentioned in the adoption record of Eduardo. She seemed the last to have taken care of her grandson before he was taken to a children's home in mid-2011 and finally adopted in early 2014. In one of the social reports, there was a small description of the neighbourhood where the grandmother lived at that time. Mayerlin and I took a motorbike taxi to this area and asked the taxi driver to drop us off at the place described. Within 10 minutes, we found the grandmother's house and knocked on the fence. A relatively small older woman, who later identified as Quechua, approached us and asked why we wanted to talk to her. We explained that we were looking for her on behalf of her adopted grandson, Eduardo. We asked her if she had time to talk to us. She welcomed us into her garden and brought three chairs so we could talk better. We gave Isabela a copy of the adoption documents so she could see that we had come legitimately on behalf of Eduardo. The adoption files also showed her the events that had led to her grandson being declared 'abandoned,' resulting in a transnational adoption of the child. After our conversation, we were invited to lunch the next day with Isabela's two daughters and their respective families, where they rehashed the whole story. We also had a video phone call with the adoptive family so they could meet the entire Bolivian family present.

6.4.1 "They did not want me to enter the children's home"

In the previous chapter, I described how Isabela temporarily transferred the care of her grandson to a children's home. Isabela was then approached and followed up by a social worker from the children's home, who helped her start the family reunification process. However, despite the social worker's efforts to enable the grandmother to reunite with her grandson, a later report reads that Isabela did not visit the boy in the children's home. The following year, Eduardo was transferred to another children's home that allegedly better suited his needs. Another social worker was assigned to take care of Eduardo's case there. The paperwork showed that this new social worker called the grandmother to invite her to the Santa Cruz de la Sierra office, but Isabela did not attend. The social worker concluded in her report that this indicated a "lack of commitment and importance to the situation and future of her grandson." At the end of 2012, the boy was declared adoptable and a year later, he was assigned to a Dutch adoptive family. However, when

Mayerlin and I asked Isabela why she stopped visiting Eduardo, she told us a different story that did not correspond to the written accounts in the adoption files. She explained that she was occasionally working in another department at the time and had lost the social worker's phone number, so she could no longer contact the children's home:

I did not show up. When I went to the countryside, the children's home called me, "Where are you?" they said. "I am in the countryside," I told them. "I am in Sucre. When I arrive [in Santa Cruz de la Sierra], I will be there." In Sucre, I stayed for three months to work. (...) We communicated well, but later I lost the phone number and could no longer communicate [with the children's home]. (Isabela, interview December 2020)

The loss of the phone number had made it impossible for her to contact the children's home. Although Isabela was portrayed in the report as "lacking commitment," it failed to reference her work duties. Similarly, Roberts (2002, p. 89) observes how the child protection system in the USA obscures 'the systematic reasons for families' hardships by laying the blame on the individual parent's failing.' This oppressive logic also seems to operate in Isabela's case, emphasising her alleged lack of commitment while ignoring her work situation. Furthermore, Roberts (2002, 2022) describes how many disenfranchised Black parents are unfamiliar with the administrative and bureaucratic landscape of child protection. Isabela is a working-class Quechua woman unfamiliar with the institutional bureaucracies and rules and is therefore not aware of the possible consequences. The fact that Isabela had sought a temporary solution to care for her grandson, but that her difficult situation was abused to disqualify her as an unfit caregiver, affirms Robert's analysis. She could not have foreseen the consequences of the permanent loss of parental care for her grandson, which led to his transnational adoption. Moreover, Isabela told us that when she returned to the department of Santa Cruz, she visited the children's home but was denied access to the institution:

There [at the children's home], they did not want me to see him. They did not want me to enter the children's home. They said, "The boy will not let you go. The boy asked for you so much." I replied, "But I will take him home." (...) They said, "The boy will see your face, he will miss you, he will cry, and he will get sick." (...) The last time I was there, they said, "The boy is no longer here, he is in another country." (Isabela, interview December 2020)

It is striking that, according to Isabela, the staff refused her entry on the grounds that the child would become ill. This seems to indicate that the staff feared that the grandmother's visit would confuse the boy and interrupt the process of detachment from the first family, which was deemed necessary to bind him to a new family. The social workers may have made this decision 'in the best interest of the child,' as they may have genuinely believed that transnational adoption was the best option in this particular situation. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that these attempts to visit the child were not documented in the social

reports and that instead even the opposite was claimed. Such omissions are not harmless because they influence the decisions of judges, which have real and irreversible consequences. Moreover, these reports may at some point be read by the children concerned. Then the ‘social facts’ written in the documents inevitably shape the way they perceive what happened. This can lead them to think that they have been ‘abandoned’ by their relatives, when in fact these relatives have been trying to visit them and/or recover them from the children’s home. Eventually, Isabela resigned herself to the idea that strangers had adopted her grandson. When I discussed this case with my research assistant, she told me that Quechua and indigenous peoples have historically always had an unequal relationship with state agencies and have always felt powerless to file a complaint or appeal, knowing they would lose it anyway (see also Swanson, 2010; Van Vleet, 2009). At the end of our first conversation with Isabela, she told us that she hoped that her grandson would appear one day:

I believe that one day he will appear. I don’t think he will forget us. I worry about him, but we could not find him. I dream about him in my dreams. (Interview with Isabela, December 2020)

6.5 Concluding remarks

I started this chapter with the adoption controversy in the Netherlands over the temporary suspension of transnational adoption following a devastating report. By foregrounding the voices of first families, I have tried to show that the stories about child relinquishment as they are documented in the adoption files are not the neutral assessments they claim to be. The three cases show how the first family members experienced contact with child welfare professionals and reveal the weaknesses of the Bolivian child protection system. Even though in all three cases, the first family members stated that they would have liked to continue caring for the child, the child had been placed for adoption. Although this is only a small-scale study and the findings cannot be generalised, the cases discussed, and the stories shared by other first families in my research suggest that some families felt misled or coerced into giving up their child for adoption. Others felt there was no other way out for them due to the complex and difficult child protection regulations and bureaucratic procedures. It shows that institutionalisation and adoption are still too often favoured over family reunification. This finding is also consistent with the results of two national studies on children at risk of losing parental care in Bolivia, which point to the weak infrastructure and limited

resources in the child protection system as an explanation (Aldeas Infantiles SOS, 2011; IICC and Aldeas Infantiles SOS, 2017).

My analysis of adoption documents showed the strong conviction professionals have about what counts as acting in the best interests of the child, and a similar picture emerges from the family members' testimonies. Tomás, who was told that he had better give his child up for adoption under a false promise, Catarina, whose family was threatened and pressured to sign the voluntary declaration, and Isabela, who was denied access to the children's home, all show that they were confronted with child welfare professionals who are not primarily concerned with giving families the support they need to continue caring for their children. However, it would be too far to generalise this concern to all child welfare professionals. As Catarina and Isabela's stories show, they were also supported by child welfare professionals who had the families' best interests at heart and sought ways to help them reunite with their children. This shows us that the child protection system is not a monolithic system but also recognises the agency of the professionals who navigate within.

Further, my research shows that the reliance on paperwork prepared by the professionals and the authorities involved is not enough to guarantee legitimate and ethical adoptions. These testimonies reveal that coercive practices remain hidden underneath the documents presenting a fragmented reality about the adoption case. According to Loibl (2019b, p. 177), the current protection instruments and, in particular, the HCIA might work as a Trojan horse because in the paperwork everything 'appears to be perfectly legal as it formally complies with the procedures of the treaty.' The reality behind the paperwork tells a different story. Nevertheless, the papers containing voluntary relinquishment declarations, as in the case of Tomás and Catarina, contribute to the adoption being approved by the responsible authorities. Irregularities are also perpetuated by a closed adoption system, which helps making practices of deception and fraud invisible. However, the first parents can play a crucial role in exposing these irregularities by telling their story and thus questioning the legitimacy of the adoption procedures.

Chapter 7 From primal to colonial wound: Bolivian adoptees reclaiming the narrative of healing

Written by Atamhi Cawayu and Katrien De Graeve¹

7.1 Introduction

Recently there has been a renewed academic interest in the colonial power mechanisms that structure current transnational adoption practices (see e.g. Candaele, 2020; Högbäck, 2019; Ivenäs, 2017; Posocco, 2014; van Wichelen, 2019a; Wyver, 2018), building on earlier work (Ahluwalia, 2007; Hübinette, 2007; Wekker et al., 2007). This research points to the colonial roots of transnational adoption and problematises the reproduction of colonial dynamics in contemporary transnational adoption practices, including in the way racial difference and origins of adoptees become imagined.² This chapter aims to contribute to this body of work.

1 This chapter is the result of a study I conducted as part of my Master's in Gender and Diversity under the supervision of Katrien De Graeve. During the doctoral study, I conducted additional research that included more extensive fieldwork and interviews in order to write this chapter. This study was published under the title 'From primal to colonial wound: Bolivian adoptees reclaiming the narrative of healing' in *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* (29, no.5: 576-593). To ensure consistency with the spelling used throughout the dissertation, American English spellings in this chapter were replaced with their British English counterparts. In addition, the term 'article' was changed to 'chapter' to fit this dissertation better.

2 We use the term 'colonial' to refer to not just historical colonialism but also to ongoing forms of 'coloniality', i.e. the perpetuation and reconfiguration of colonial legacies in hegemonic discourses, practices and social relations (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2005).

Since the 1980s and 1990s, transnational adoptive parents in Belgium and elsewhere have increasingly been urged by adoption professionals and international treaties to pay particular attention to their child's pre-adoption past. In line with article 16b of the 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, adoption agencies and adoption intermediaries in Belgium have sensitised (prospective) adoptive parents to tell their children openly about their pre-adoption history and to express a positive attitude towards their country of origin.³ In her work on transnational adoptive parents in Belgium, De Graeve (2010) pointed to the dominant imagery that portrays adoptees as unavoidably 'wounded' because of their being uprooted and disconnected from their biological family and culture of origin. Adoption professionals train adoptive families to anticipate potential psychological distress and unsafe attachment through different techniques, including through attention to the child's preadoption past, also in terms of national and cultural origins (De Graeve, 2010, 2013). De Graeve argues that while the current discourse breaks away from 'the clean-break' narrative, it still starts from a depoliticised and psychopathological model that individualises and pathologises mental distress rather than pointing to the (global) socio-political dimensions that shape adoption trajectories.

In this chapter, we aim to re-politicize the terms of the debate, by reporting on interviews conducted with men and women adopted to Belgium who were born in Bolivia, most of them with an indigenous Aymara and Quechua background. In these interviews, we asked them to narrate their adoption experience, their experience of their adoptive parents' parenting work and their own feelings and practices in relation to their country of birth. Their stories oscillate between reproducing the dominant psychopathological understanding of their displacement and socio-political understandings that centralise the colonial dynamics in transnational adoption. We argue that a shift from imagining the adoptee as wounded in psychological terms to imagining the adoptee as wounded as a result of colonial and racialising discourses and practices, enables adoptees to reclaim 'the right to classify' (Mignolo, 2005, p. 8) and create narratives that have the capacity to overwrite the discourses of individualised pathologisation with decolonial social critique. Centralising 'the colonial' (and the wounds it causes) not only constitutes an important tool in adoptee activism, it can also serve as a useful metaphor for rethinking the work adoptive families need to be able to move beyond the persistent bio-essentialist and cultural essentialist views on family and nation.

³ Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. Available at: <https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69> (accessed 30 May 2018)

7.2 Theoretical framework

7.2.1 Culture work and the culturalisation of colonial difference

Since the 1990s, in Belgium and elsewhere a discourse that conceptualises the child as ‘rooted’ in her pre-adoption past has become dominant and has largely replaced the previous paradigm that promoted a ‘clean break’ with that past (Modell, 1994; Yngvesson, 2003). A significant number of studies has critically examined the increased attention for the pre-adoption past and the birth country’s cultural peculiarities in ‘transracial’ adoption in various national contexts (e.g. Anagnost, 2000; De Graeve, 2013; Jacobson, 2008; Marre, 2007; P. A. Quiroz, 2012; Volkman, 2003; Willing & Fronek, 2014).⁴ De Graeve (2013, p. 551) uses the term ‘culture work’ to refer to the creative and constructive parenting work Belgian transnational adoptive parents do to shape the identity and citizenship of themselves and their children. This work may include all kinds of cultural practices, including consuming food, music and artefacts that originate from their adoptive child’s birth country.

However, despite the paradigmatic shift in adoption, prevailing adoption discourses still tend to start from the idea that adoptees suffer from a ‘primal wound’ (Verrier, 1993) that has been caused by the adoptees’ separation from their first families and cultures. The narrative of the traumatic rupture of the mother-child relationship (and by extension the nation-citizen relationship) draws on essentialist notions of family (and nation) and renders adoptees’ life journeys pathological (for a discussion on the pathologizing of displacement more general, see Malkki, 1992). This narrative is all pervasive in adoption discourse, including in the discourses that assign a different *cultural* essence to adoptees that requires culture work. De Graeve’s and other studies on adoptive parents’ culture work have denounced the practice for its underlying cultural essentialist and bio-essentialist notions which put an alleged genetic-cultural origin at the core of adoptee’s identity formation (De Graeve, 2014; Howell, 2006). Various researchers have criticised adoptive parents’ culture work for being a form of ‘cultural tourism’ (P. A. Quiroz, 2012), cultural commodification (Park Nelson, 2006) and for even further alienating adopted children from their cultures of origin because of the ‘fictional and distorted construction of identity with limited possibilities for maintaining real or substantive ties to the culture of origin’ (P. A. Quiroz, 2012, p. 532). Moreover, several studies have pointed to the parents’ tendency to conflate culture and ‘race.’ This conflation is particularly evidenced by the observation that in transracially adoptive families the cultural background of the

⁴ We place terms such as ‘transracial’, ‘race’, ‘white’, etc. between quotation marks the first time they are used in the text, to emphasize that they are socially constructed – as opposed to objective biological markers.

adoptive child is usually given more attention than in 'white' families with children of white colour (Jacobson, 2008; Marre, 2007). Mignolo (2005, p. 37) critiques the culturalisation of race as, according to him, it overlooks the imperial/colonial power differentials. Therefore he pleads for the use of the term 'colonial difference'. He emphasises that race plays a central role but not in 'the sense of the color of one's skin but in the sense of how one has been located in the chain of human being by Western imperial discourses' (Mignolo 2011, 481). This brings us to our second central concept.

7.2.2 Coloniality and decolonial healing

We aim to situate the adoptees' narratives in a broader scope, including in wider practices of relocating indigenous populations in Bolivia and elsewhere to govern and control them. The case of transnational adoption of Aymara and Quechua children resembles other practices of displacing indigenous children in the USA, Canada, and Australia as part of projects of forced assimilation and civilising during and after European colonisation. Drawing this parallel reaches back to earlier interpretations of transnational adoption as a colonial practice embedded in a larger history of exploitation of the Global South and the stratified migration dominated by the Global North (Eng, 2006; Fieweger, 1991; Hübinette, 2007; Wekker et al., 2007). These parallels seem to be justified when we consider the fact that transnational adoption is a demand-driven industry plagued by recurrent practices of abuse, child trafficking, and other irregularities (Cheney & Rotabi, 2014; Leifsen, 2008; McKee, 2016; Smolin, 2004).

Several authors have argued that the 'colonial reality' of transnational adoption is not limited to the macro level but also infiltrates the most intimate spheres of transnational adoptees' lives (Tigervall & Hübinette, 2010; Wekker et al., 2007). Drawing on decolonial thought (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2005, 2017; Quijano, 2007), we use the term 'coloniality' as defined by Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 243) to point to the global socio-political reality that shapes transnational adoption. Maldonado-Torres argues that 'coloniality survives colonialism' and 'is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience'. According to him, modern subjects 'breathe coloniality all the time and everyday.'

Mignolo (2005) argues that discourses and practices of coloniality cause 'colonial wounds,' or, with reference to a term coined by Ureña (2019, p. 1642), 'invisible wounds of coloniality.' The 'colonial wound' points to the physical and/or psychological pain that is a 'consequence of racism, the hegemonic discourse that questions the humanity of all those who do not belong to the locus of enunciation (and the geo-politics of knowledge) of those who assign the standards of classification and assign to themselves the right to classify' (Mignolo, 2005, p. 8). We suggest that this struggle over the standards of

classification is at the heart of the adoptees' claims to belonging. While the adoptees in this study did not use the concept themselves, the 'colonial wound' captures a discursive field that they start to construct. Some of the strategies the Bolivian adoptees used, include what could be interpreted as 'decolonial tactics' and processes of '*delinking* [oneself] from foreign powers' control over lives' (Mignolo, 2017, p. 44, emphasis added). These tactics and processes constitute a counter-narrative to the prevailing discourses that tend to psychologise adoptees' experiences by explaining them through narratives of primordial blood ties of family. Discursively shifting the root of their metaphorical wounds from the psyche to the 'colonial' can be seen as a way of what Mignolo calls 'rebuilding and re-existing under new conditions and modes of existences that are your own' (Mignolo, 2017, p. 44, emphasis added).

7.3 Methodology

This chapter draws upon the first author's research conducted in the framework of his master thesis, under supervision of the second author, and complemented with the preliminary research from his ongoing doctoral study on 'roots', child relinquishment, search and reunion in transnational adoption from Bolivia. Interviews with twelve Bolivian adoptees (eight women, four men) have been carried out combined with multiple participant observation sessions during Bolivian adoptee gatherings and festivities mainly in Flanders, Belgium. The participants were selected through the contacts of the first author with considerable attention to the variety of experiences, self-identifications and different ways of giving meaning to their birth country. They were adopted between 1983 and 1996 and their ages range from 21 to 37 at the time of the interview, yet the majority of them have been raised in Belgium after 1990. Nearly all of the participants have travelled to Bolivia at some point in their lives (eleven participants), five of whom several times.

We have used a critical discourse analytical frame of moving from the micro to the macro to better understand our data (Blommaert, 2005; Van Dijk, 1993) and have looked to how the narratives of the participants are embedded in the broader web of culturally, socially, and historically situated discourses and power dynamics. Therefore it was essential to look at the adoptees' stories, not as expressions of essential truths, but as discursive strategies which might have both restraining and potentially empowering and transformative effects. More specifically, we coded the transcripts by identifying frequent topics, clustered them into themes and grouped the themes into three meta-themes, i.e. adoptees' reflections on their parents' culture work, adoptee gatherings, and adoptees' identity formations. We then assigned the coded text passages to emerging

conceptual categories that reflect the discursive strategies employed by the interviewees and their relation to wider ideological configurations.

Adoptions from Bolivia to Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, occurred between the early 1980s until the end of the 1990s.⁵ We estimate that in that period about 45 Bolivian children have been placed in Flemish adoptive families. However, as back in the days not all adoptions from Bolivia were monitored by the Flemish Community government, the total number of children adopted from Bolivia to Flanders is basically unknown. Before the Belgian ratification of the Convention of The Hague on Intercountry Adoption in 2005, only accredited adoption agencies carried out transnational adoptions under supervision of a governmental organisation of one of the three community governments in Belgium. *Interadoptie*, the accredited adoption agency that was responsible for adoptions from Bolivia to the Flemish Community indicates that they placed 25 Bolivian children with Flemish adoptive parents in the period between 1982 and 1999. However, information collected for this research shows that there have also been adoptions through other channels, such as unofficial adoption intermediaries who facilitated adoptions to Flanders. In at least one case this involved the kidnapping of a child.

The focus on Belgium, and on Flanders in particular, was mainly for practical reasons, as both authors live and work in Flanders. However, this focus is also needed as, so far, knowledge of the experiences of adult adoptees in the country is almost completely lacking, a few very small studies notwithstanding (see Buysse & Vandenbroeck, 2015; De Pauw, Hoksbergen, & Van Aelst, 1998; Paulis, 1991). The country's colonial history is also remarkable, especially in light of the lack of a critical debate concerning the colonial history and colonial remnants. Several researchers have observed how the general amnesia concerning the colonial past goes hand in hand with the denial or minimisation of race and racism (Ceuppens & De Mul, 2009; De Graeve & Kanobana, 2020). A multiculturalism discourse is adopted in relation to the country's linguistic-cultural divide, yet the Flemish-speaking and French-speaking communities are imagined as ethnically and culturally homogeneous (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998; Coene & Longman, 2008). In the northern, Flemish-speaking part in particular, autochthony discourses have an increasingly strong appeal in imageries of who the 'real' locals are (Ceuppens, 2006). Policy-making aims at assimilation of immigrants and points to cultural differences of immigrants and their descendants (not race) as the cause of the persistent barriers that immigrants face in navigating the job and housing market for instance. While anti-immigration sentiments are strong in Flanders, family and reproduction policy still actively supports transnational adoption. Policymakers tend to see

⁵ The number of Bolivian children that have been placed in the southern, French-speaking part of Belgium, is unknown.

transnational adoption as a viable way for Belgian citizens to expand their families and tend to draw on an imagery that valorises adoptees as symbols for racial harmony and as living diversity tokens (Hübinette, 2007).

The focus on adoptees from Bolivia with an indigenous background (Aymara or Quechua) is important because transnational adoptions from the Latin American continent have been understudied in general (with the exception of e.g.: Briggs, 2012b; Dubinsky, 2010; Posocco, 2014)—despite the high numbers of adoptions from this continent (Selman, 2009)—with an even greater dearth of information available on adoptions of indigenous children from the Andean region (Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador). Despite a few exceptions (e.g. Clavero, 2002; Leinaweaver, 2008), the study of adoptions of indigenous children so far has been limited to the USA, Canada and Australia (see e.g. Cardinal, 2016; Heanga-Collins & Gibbs, 2015; Jacobs, 2014). So far, transnational adoptions of Latin American indigenous children to mainly white families in the Global North has seldom been analysed through a decolonial lens and/or as part of the ongoing structural violence against and displacements of indigenous people in the America's.

7.4 Bolivia into our home: The parent's culture work

During the interviews in this study, most adoptees recounted memories of being surrounded by artefacts that referred to Bolivia and its indigenous people in one way or the other. They talked about the Bolivian (folkloric) music, the cuddly toys, the books, the paintings, the little Inca statues, the Bolivian national flag, the Bolivian crib, the panpipes, the knitted caps, the textiles with llama designs, the woven blankets (awayus), etc., that figured prominently in their houses. Most of them perceived the presence of Bolivian artefacts with rather positive sentiments. Twenty-four-year-old Naya, for instance, who was adopted at 16 months of age, even explicitly stated that she felt thankful and had appreciated how her parents 'brought Bolivia into our home.' Guillermo, 28-years old, who was almost five when he was adopted together with his younger brother, indicated that their parents 'wanted that we could keep some of our culture' and seemed to have experienced this as a positive thing.

Some adoptees, however, also recounted memories of being dressed up as 'Indians' and wearing 'Indian' costumes during carnival or during gatherings of their adoptive families.⁶ While some did not particularly problematise these occurrences, a few adoptees

⁶ The word 'Indian' was used repeatedly by the participants to refer to indigenous people. We aim to emphasize that we are aware of the colonial connotations of the word.

discussed these memories as an example of having felt stereotyped and racialised, at least in retrospect, or recalled to have felt uncomfortable during some of these occasions. They indicated that they found they were somehow forced to embrace 'their' cultural origins and perform 'foreignness' for their white families (Falvey, 2008). Yet, some explained that back in the days they were not aware of the racist implications of being dressed up as 'an Indian,' but that it was only later that they realised that they were somehow staged as an exotic 'Other' in their parents' fantasy of the 'multicultural' family. However, Asamie, a 25-year-old woman adopted a few days after birth, explained how even as a child she resisted being stereotyped as 'Bolivian':

Asamie: Well, if something about Bolivia was on TV, my parents often called me and asked me to watch. Then I said I did not want to watch and even now, I still don't want to watch it.

Atamhi: And why not?

Asamie: I think I don't want to watch because this is forced upon me, it is as if things belong to me. But I don't want to be forced into this, I want to discover what I'm interested in by myself.

During the interviews, many of the adoptees also talked about the Bolivian adoptee gatherings that were organised in Belgium for about ten years from the second part of the 1990s onwards. Previous research (De Graeve, 2013, 2016; Howell, 2006) shows that festive gatherings have become a common practice among adoptive families and have even been encouraged by adoption agencies, adoption organisations and adoption guides in Belgium. These festive gatherings are usually considered by adoptive parents as an important means to share experiences with each other and to bring their adopted children in contact with other adoptees from the same or other countries of origin. The gatherings of Bolivian adoptive families took place in different Flemish towns, and were alternately organised by one of the families, typically in the hometown of the organising family. The gatherings were relatively small and usually attracted about 10 adoptive families with their children. The participants in this study who were adopted from 1992 to 1996 all recalled having participated in these gatherings at least once in their lives.

The majority of the interviewees looked back on those gatherings with positive memories. Most of them recalled the gatherings as pleasant and fun, yet some had some reservations. Carlos, for instance, 23 years old and adopted at the age of six months, said that he remembered that he never understood why he needed to connect to other people from Bolivia.

What I remember of those gatherings is that I didn't like to go because I was seen as a Bolivian child while I wanted to be seen as a Belgian child. Well, I was not completely annoyed because I like to meet other people, but I didn't like to have my Bolivian-ness emphasized. That is why I stopped going to those gatherings. (Carlos, 23 yr.)

Some adoptees recounted that young as they were (between 5 and 10 years old), playing with other Bolivian adoptees was not necessarily an activity they looked particularly forward to. They said that they did not really feel Bolivian at that age and were not specifically interested in Bolivia nor in adoption.

The quotes exemplify the complex discursive struggle in the adoptees' narratives. When Asamie says that she wants to decide for herself what she likes, she draws on neoliberal notions of self-actualisation and individual choice to criticize moments of having been stereotyped by her parents. She denounces her parents' parenting work as too pampering and paternalistic, which contradicts the plea for intensification of adoptive parents' training which is often advocated by adoptee organisations in Flanders. Local adoptee advocacy groups argue for monitoring adoptive families even more, including intensifying the adoptive parents' training in terms of preserving the culture of origin, more low-threshold assistance and/or obligatory aftercare for adoptive families and adoptees.⁷ This standpoint draws on the dominant Western middle class ideologies of intensive parenting on the one hand (for a discussion of intensive parenting see De Graeve & Longman, 2013; Hays, 1996) and prevalent discourses that depict the care for adoptees as extraordinary demanding and challenging. Adoptees' pleas for increasing monitoring of adoptive parents implicitly endorse the mainstream and official policy rhetoric that starts from the idea that adoptees are likely to be psychologically unstable, incomplete and/or damaged, and therefore in need of specialised guidance and expert knowledge.

However, when both Carlos and Asamie look back on and criticize their parents' attempts to (re)connect them to their 'birth culture', they draw on entirely different presuppositions and concerns. Here, they fall back on antiracist critiques that are increasingly vocalised in Belgian society—yet are still the object of intense contestation—and provide people of colour with a vocabulary to frame their experiences and feelings of racialisation, discrimination, and non-belonging. In contrast to earlier generation adoptees, they have had parents who were already subjected to a considerable amount of monitoring and control, and were instructed on how to do culture work, yet the adoptees criticize the paternalistic and essentializing aspects of the parenting work. Doing so, the adoptees implicitly shift the focus of the problem (or the 'wound') away from their purported psychological vulnerability (primal wound) to the adoptive society that is unable to sustain difference (colonial wound).

7 Te Awa (2016) *Standpunten en aanbevelingen over de nieuwe conceptnota betreffende interlandelijke adoptie*.

7.5 Feeling of togetherness: Bolivian adoptee gatherings

While the previous section focused on how the interviewees looked back upon their parents' culture work, this section discusses the adoptees' own work of trying to reclaim a positive identity. Although some indicated to have mixed feelings about the gatherings for Bolivian adoptive families, many of the research participants explained that these gatherings have resulted in long-term connections with other adoptees and that many of them have kept seeing each other. After the family gatherings stopped being organised, little groups of female friends stayed in contact, met each other repeatedly and went to parties, to the movies or to a 'girls night' together. Interestingly enough, several of the adoptees emphasised that these friendships had not so much to do with their common identity as 'Bolivian' or as adoptee, but more with being of the same age and having common interests.

Some of the interviewees recounted that once they were in their early twenties, they had taken the initiative to organise a sort of reunion of all the Bolivian adoptees who had been participating in the gatherings for Bolivian-Belgian adoptive families and to keep in contact through a self-created 'Bolivian Adoptees'-online platform. They said that the first adoptee meetings, unlike the family gatherings, had a clear purpose to them, notably the need to share experiences and knowledge about return trips to Bolivia with people who were in the same situation. Yet they continued to meet each other regularly, which made the meetings evolve into a space for discussing not only things about Bolivia, but also about all kind of themes, including everyday life, school, and relationships. Some interviewees said that for them it was important that the gatherings enabled them to talk in a safe and non-judgemental way. Meetings happened once to twice a month, with the whole group sleeping over in the house of one of the adoptees. Naya, who had gone to live in Bolivia for a couple of years, has then returned to Belgium, yet has also stayed in contact with her social network in Bolivia mainly through social media, described the gatherings as follows:

The beauty of the gatherings is that you are with other people who are in the same boat and therefore can understand you. I do have very good, respectful, and nice Belgian friends but because they are not in the same situation as me, they can't imagine what it is like to live in-between two worlds. (...) That is why it is very important to have friends who are going through this process and this allows us to understand each other very easily. (Naya, 24 yr.)

Using the expression 'in the same boat', Naya articulated her experience of having a lot in common with fellow Bolivian adoptees. Also Sarah, 21 years old and adopted at 10 months of age, described the gathering with other Bolivian adoptees as a way of sharing a 'feeling of togetherness'. Some of the Bolivian adoptees even designated this feeling as

a sense of kinship. The adoptees' phrasing in terms of togetherness and kinship seems to creatively use both family of choice discourses and discourses of biological kinship, claiming (almost) kin connections with people with whom they are not biologically related but share national and racial origins. Kim (2007, p. 522) made similar observations in her research on Korean-USA adoption. She observed that Korean adoptees tend to experience their connections with other Korean adoptees as a 'powerful form of relatedness that is based on radical contingency, shared generational consciousness and elective affinities that articulate adoptees' "unnatural histories" and struggles for cultural citizenship in the West and in South Korea'.⁸

Naya's expression 'living in-between two worlds' refers to her experience of having lived in Bolivia for several years and the subsequent process of having to re-adapt to Belgian society again. Naya explained her decision to go and live in Bolivia in terms of her search for racial belonging and a growing desire to acquaint herself with Bolivian culture. Her return to Bolivia, to use Mignolo's words, was a practice of 'delinking' from the colonial legacies that structure her life and have put her in a position in which the legitimacy of her presence in Belgium is constantly being questioned. She experienced her new life in Bolivia, finding a job, being surrounded by Bolivian people, learning more about Aymara culture and practices, getting acquainted with different knowledge systems, etc. as a tool to 're-exist' and heal from the hurt that she thinks colonial and racist discourses in Belgium have caused. When Naya talked about her decision to go back to Belgium, she emphasised her need to keep finding ways of delinking and re-existing, for instance through attending Bolivian adoptee gatherings. These gathering, she explained, tend to provide her with a feeling of comfortableness similar to what she experienced in Bolivia, a space in which she can safely express her feelings and experiences as a Bolivian adoptee. The adoptees' reference to the gatherings as places that evoke feelings of togetherness and understanding also hinge on a politics of intimate citizenship in which advocacy groups become spaces in which 'deviant' bodies are normalised and develop their own visible and positive cultures that can leak into broader public spheres and have the capacity to shift boundaries in society at large (Plummer, 2001).

8 E. Kim (2007) uses the term 'unnatural histories' to refer to adoptees' shared histories of displacement and search for belonging, while at the same time their lives have been marked by untraditional forms of kinship.

7.6 Disguised as a Bolivian: Negotiating racial and national identities

In this section we discuss how the Bolivian adoptees in our study negotiate their racial and national identity, an identity that they tend to imagine as multiple and complex. The subject of racial, ethnic, and cultural identifications was brought up multiple times by Bolivian adoptees during the interviews or gatherings. Guillermo (see above) for instance, pointed to the various identities with whom he is able to identify:

Yes, I do feel like a Fleming. My friends also tell me ‘you are a real Belgian’. [...] For sure I’m also Bolivian. [...] East-Fleming as well. [...] And actually I feel citizen of the city where I grew up first, and a Bolivian second. (Guillermo, 28yr.)⁹

What is interesting, however, is that most of the interviewees expressed to have a white identity:

Yes of course I am white. I was raised here, and I haven’t received any culture from Bolivia or their ways of thinking. Not at all. So, I’m actually white inside and brown outside. [...]. So, I’m actually *disguised* as a Bolivian, but I’m just like the [white] people here. I only *look* different. (Pablo, 21yr.)

Using race and culture as interchangeable, Pablo, who is 21 years old and was adopted at six months of age, argues that his acquaintance with Belgian culture makes him white. Some of the Bolivian adoptees also explicitly stated that they only date white partners, or like Pablo ‘rarely date people of colour, actually almost never.’ Hübinette (2007, p. 143) argues that this white self-subjectivity for people of colour can be seen as the result of ‘constantly copying, imitating and mimicking whiteness on an everyday level.’ He relies on Butler’s (1993) performativity theory to explain the mechanisms that make transracial adoptees ‘perform’ whiteness.¹⁰ In addition, he notes that this desire towards whiteness is not uncommon for colonial subjects. The preference of some of the adoptees for white partners might also be a result of this white self-subjectivity and an illustration of how colonial imageries promote whiteness as the universal standard of excellence, beauty and desire, but at the same time stipulate which bodies are able to reach this standard and which bodies are not (Wekker et al., 2007). Hübinette refers to transracial adoptees as ‘ethnic drags [...] who are troubling, mocking and parodying supposedly fixed racial,

⁹ East-Fleming refers to being an inhabitant of the Belgian province of East-Flanders.

¹⁰ Hübinette’s (2007) use of performativity theory suggests that transracial adoptees’ white subjectivities destabilise dominant notions of whiteness while they at the same time underline how colonial power mechanisms set the limits of racial identity formation.

ethnic, and national identities and belongings' (p. 143). Pablo's words '*disguised as a Bolivian*' perfectly grasp this performativity of racial identity.

While some of the interviewees' claimed to identify as white, most of the participants also identified as Bolivian. They often described themselves as either a mixture of Belgian and Bolivian or as a 'Belgian with Bolivian roots.' The adoptees thus seemed to feel the need to acknowledge their Bolivian background, and even said to be proud of their country of origin. However, most of the interviewees were rather reticent in fully claiming a 'Bolivian' identity. Some even reported that they had not always been comfortable with being non-white and being associated with Bolivia. They explicitly recounted childhood memories of their desire to be white. Even Naya, who recently moved back to Bolivia for a couple of years (see above) said:

In High School, around the age of twelve, thirteen, I started to have a distaste for Bolivia. I wanted to be Belgian, I wanted to be white (...). I didn't want to have anything to do with Bolivia. I did not want to be reminded every time again that I come from Bolivia. It irritated me a lot (Naya, 24 yr).

In this quote Naya explicitly connects her memory of wanting to be white to her memory of having an aversion to anything Bolivian and an aversion to her own body. She presents this memory as a memory of a turning point ('I started to'), yet leaves the repeated events ('every time again') that had led to this turning point implicit. Her narrative highlights that she had come to see her own 'brown' body as something Bolivian, and therefore 'other', unable to be Belgian. She explained that the 'colonial' gaze that she had learnt to adopt, had made her believe that Bolivia represented nothing but poverty and underdevelopment, which was something she did not want to be associated with (see also Leinaweaver, 2013). Further on in the interview, Naya explained that her aversion to her country of origin and to the colour of her skin has disappeared when growing older. She said that she now identifies as a 'proud Latina.'

While the adoptees did not tend to see their Bolivian-ness as an essential identity, they nevertheless sometimes reverted to bio-essentialist ideas, which may be informed by prevailing stereotypes of Latin Americans. Several of the adoptees, for instance, tended to support the idea that Bolivians have a natural sense of rhythm. When Elio, 22 years old and adopted at age one, was asked what made him a Latino, he replied:

The rhythm, it is something that is highly present. The feeling I have with dancing. The macho part is present too. I always want to show I am here, I will never quickly move away from someone or something. (Elio, 22 yr.)

While most of the adoptees in this study claimed to be white, some claimed to be brown rather than white and explained that their frequent experiences with racism and racialisation had heightened their awareness of being non-white. Unlike most of the adoptees' narratives that only implicitly referred to feelings of non-belonging, these

stories explicitly discussed experiences of exclusion in society. Some of the adoptees explicitly pointed to the adoptive society for failing to fully embrace transracial adoptees, due to their non-white bodies rendered illegitimate by discourses of race and coloniality. They explained that, as a strategy, they had chosen to show pride in their origins rather than hiding or minimalizing their racial differences. By wearing Bolivian accessories, by speaking Spanish in public with peers from Latin America, by travelling back to or by moving to Bolivia for longer periods of time, by frequenting places where other people with a migration background gather or by exclusively dating people of colour, etc., they aimed to highlight the position of Otherness that they occupy in Belgian society. Using these strategies, the adoptees move beyond the dominant narrative of adoptees' need for individual psychological healing and/or restoration of a presumed lack of ability to attach to family and nation. These strategies of fully embracing the own Otherness and shaping spaces in which it is not whiteness and Eurocentric perspectives that centre themselves as the norm, can be interpreted as another example of the strategies of delinking and trying to regain pride, and dignity, and assuming humanity 'in front of an un-human being that makes you believe you were abnormal, lesser, that you lack something' (Mignolo in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 207).

7.7 Conclusion: from 'primal wound' to 'decolonial healing'

This chapter has aimed to make a novel contribution to the scholarship on (indigenous) adoptees from Latin America through a study of the narratives of Bolivian adoptees in Flanders, Belgium, regarding their cultural, ethnic, and racial identifications. We aimed to investigate how the heightened importance that has been accorded to the adoptees' birth countries since the early 1990s, and that has urged adoptive parents to do culture work, has influenced adoptees' feelings of belonging. We have tried to lay bare the struggle implicit in the adoptees' stories that tries to reclaim discursive control over their own lives and histories. We have shown that the adoptees try to make sense of their experiences, drawing on various and contradicting discourses that circulate in society, and do so in rather ambivalent and complicated ways. Implicit in their stories is the feeling of living somehow exceptional lives (exceptional identities) that can cause pain and rejection. Their narratives both reproduce and reject hegemonic explanations that depict adoptees as 'wounded' *per definition*, be it through their being snatched away from the naturalised mother-child bond, be it through their being uprooted from the national ground where they allegedly belong (racially and culturally). In spite of the ambivalence

in their stories, they seem to reject victimisation and reclaim control over the narrative of their identity and (psychological) wellbeing. We have argued that in their stories a shift is discernible from explaining their being hurt or wounded in individual-psychological terms (the primal wound) to explaining it in social terms (the colonial wound). According to Ureña (2019, p. 1643), ‘the invisible wounds of coloniality cannot be healed without radical changes in politics, [...], and in narratives about the full humanity of oppressed people’. Some Bolivian adoptees in this study have actively searched for options to delink themselves from colonial discourses and practices in order to find pride and dignity in spaces in which their non-white bodies are being denied legitimate membership.

The stories presented in this chapter show that Bolivian adoptees draw on various discourses to build their narratives of (non)belonging and healing, including on postcolonial and decolonial perspectives that only recently have become introduced in Belgian activist spaces. We believe that decolonial perspectives offer promising possibilities for adoptees to reclaim control over the narrative of their life and possibilities for healing. They create space (although not without contestation) for voicing the pain inflicted by colonial oppression, which, according to Mignolo (2005, 62), ‘offers the starting point not only for acts of rebellion but for thinking-otherwise’. The narrative shift from primal to colonial wound can be seen as an act of reclaiming control and of resisting the omnipresent discourses that tend to render adoptees’ life trajectories pathological, and provides them pathways to decolonial horizons of liberation.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

8.1 Key findings

There has been much criticism of the transnational adoption system in recent decades. The shifting global debate on transnational adoption calls into question the desirability of continuing transnational adoption in its current form. Through this dissertation, I have attempted to make a novel contribution to this debate by exploring the voices and perspectives of first families, child welfare and adoption professionals, and Bolivian adoptees. The previous chapters have focused on answering the principal research question: Under what conditions and contexts do child relinquishment, child removal, and searches occur in transnational adoption from Bolivia? I explored this question using a critical and activist anthropological approach, drawing from various qualitative methods and techniques. As a result, I have gained valuable insights into child welfare and adoption practices, enabling me to identify various logics and mechanisms at play.

This study has revealed that many of the first parents and relatives interviewed were negatively evaluated by professionals in the child protection system in Bolivia, resulting in child relinquishment or removal. Poverty seemed to play a crucial role in the narratives of most families. My research shows that families under scrutiny by child welfare professionals are evaluated against parenting standards that favour a nuclear, white, middle-class, two-parent family. These normative parenting ideals are influenced by historical and global representations of what constitutes good parenting (see also Briggs, 2020; Purnell, 2021b; Roberts, 2022; Swanson, 2010; Wells, 2009). The families in this study that deviate from this standard, such as indigenous, racialised, impoverished and marginalised families, show to be more prone to being monitored, punished, and policed by the child protection system. The stories of the first families illustrate how parenting practices and contexts that deviate from prevailing understandings of parenting ideals are at odds with each other, making these families more vulnerable to state surveillance and family policing. This mechanism puts vulnerable families at risk of having their children taken away or being persuaded to give a child up for adoption. Several of the

first families in my study perceived their interaction with the child protection system as threatening rather than supportive. This leads me to conclude that the child protection system largely fails to deliver on its promise to support parents who want to care for their children. On the contrary, this system tends to police and punish parents for their failures by taking their children away from them, even in situations where there might have been other solutions. However, it is important to point out that not all professionals within the family-policing system, as it is called by various scholars (see e.g. Burton & Montauban, 2021; Roberts, 2021), follow this oppressive logic. In some of the cases discussed, professionals have taken a more humane and compassionate approach to prevent the unnecessary removal of children.

My study has also pointed out the loopholes that allow extractive adoption practices within the official adoption system despite the regulation provided by the various adoption legislations. Since its inception, the official adoption system has been plagued by irregular and illegal practices such as kidnapping, coercion, and fraud due to the lack of control and supervision of foreign adoption organisations and intermediaries in the 1970s and 1980s. In response, Bolivia ratified various conventions to regulate and improve the system and revisited the adoption legislation in the 1990s. In examining adoption records and considering the perspectives of first families, I have found in several cases that coercive and deceptive practices have resulted in children being ‘voluntarily’ placed for adoption. The closed character of the adoption system makes it possible for irregular practices to occur even in legal and contemporary adoptions as the accounts of the first families remain invisible. However, the voices of the first families undermine the official narrative and expose a darker side of the child protection and adoption system. Although this does not mean that all adoptions are fraudulent, my observations point out the defects of the present adoption system and question the reliability of the paperwork, which is rarely questioned in the official adoption system both in demand and supply nations.

Another interesting observation is the resistance and rebellion among the first families and Bolivian adoptees. This study revealed their different approaches and strategies in the search for restoration and belonging. Many first families expressed a desire to stay informed about the child’s whereabouts. Some attempted to search for the child and re-establish contact with them. However, first families had no institutional support and were left to their own devices, with no legal rights to reach out to their children. The narratives of Bolivian adoptees show that they are searching for healing from the (colonial) wounds inflicted on them. They do so by negotiating their cultural, racial, and ethnic identities, exploring their origins, and finding community. Their strategies reveal the resilience and agency they exercise in finding belonging, kinship and togetherness with their chosen communities.

8.2 Implications

The insights gained from this study provide us with a better understanding of the oppressive logics and mechanisms inherent in how the child protection and transnational adoption system is shaped by prevailing discourses and ideologies of the exclusive family, good parenting, and the ‘best interest’ of the child. In light of the findings presented, it is vital to consider the potential implications and make relevant suggestions. By doing so, I look critically at traditional reforms that, according to abolitionists, only strengthen the oppressive systems and its logics. Instead, I believe in an abolitionist horizon for transnational adoption.

Over five decades, Bolivia has introduced various Codes for Children and Adolescents and ratified conventions to adjust adoption policy and legislation. While these reforms have eradicated many extractive adoption practices, they have also further legitimised the transnational system as just, safe, and ethical. This is despite the loopholes that remain present in the system. However, these reforms have not radically questioned the foundations of the transnational adoption system, which are rooted in (global) social inequality, saviourism and racism. An abolitionist view advocates for the total dismantling of these harmful systems and its logics. Abolitionism means not only tearing down oppressive systems but also creating new structures (A. Y. Davis, 2005; Roberts, 2022). It proposes alternative ways of looking at care, family, and parenting in a globalised world.

Working towards an abolitionist horizon for adoption and child protection may sound very abstract and intangible, and therefore may seem like an impossible project. However, adoptee movements, academics and professionals who have addressed the inequalities and injustices of past and current adoption systems have already taken the first steps towards such a world. This dissertation also contributes to these efforts. It is important to remember that abolishing these systems is often a long-term project that can only be achieved gradually. I hereby put forward the nuance that the abolition of the transnational adoption system should be accompanied by the dismantling of the child protection system. Transnational adoption is only one of the outcomes of the child protection system, which polices and regulates vulnerable families in the first place. It is also important to note that an abolitionist perspective does not necessarily advocate that children always remain with their families of origin, nor does it glorify an idealised version of the family, but instead inspires ‘a radical change in how we think about the kind of caregiving the family usually provides’ (Roberts in Samudzi & Abdurahman, 2022). An abolitionist view is therefore critical not only of child welfare and adoption institutions but also of the institution of family (see for example, Lewis, 2022). To achieve the abolitionist premise, I return to the concept of non-reformist reforms or partial abolitions that can bring us closer to long-term change. Abolitionists have emphasised

that these non-reformist reforms enable us to shrink the system until it no longer exists (Ben-Moshe, 2013; Roberts, 2022). Based on the findings of this study, I propose some non-reformist reforms that can help to reduce the power and impact of the child protection and adoption system on first families, adoptees and their wider first and adoptive communities.

A possible non-reformist reform to slowly dismantle the adoption system could be the abolition of the closed adoption system, which requires the complete severance of ties between the child and the first family. This non-reformist reform has the ability to shrink the power of the adoption system as it discourages extractive adoption practices. These practices are perpetuated in a closed adoption system that renders the first parents invisible. The proposed change can entail that first families no longer have to live in the shadow of adoption policy but allow them to play a more significant role in the lives of children. Moreover, this change would mean that the adoption system would have less power to regulate the searches of adoptees and their first families, as openness and transparency would be prioritised in policy decisions. This new approach also challenges the idea of the two-parent nuclear family and invites us to consider other approaches to inclusive parenting models, such as multiple parenthood, which recognises first parents and other social parents.

Another possible non-reformist reform is expanding alternative care solutions such as kinship care and community care in response to the mass institutionalisation of children in private and public children's homes. For vulnerable families who need support for a certain period or are temporarily unable to care for their child, more temporary care options should be made available without necessarily severing ties. In Bolivia, some examples of NGOs providing facilities where children can continue to grow up in an environment with parent figures other than their first parents.

These non-reformist reforms are the first possible steps towards imagining a world where children and families in precarious situations do not necessarily have to be separated. Ultimately, I believe that the end of transnational adoption as we know it is inevitable. With this possible end to the era of transnational adoption, hopefully the time has come for an era of reparation, where first families and adoptees can heal from their (colonial) wounds and their search for restoration is supported in every way possible.

Summary

Research on transnational adoption has paid insufficient attention to the perspectives of actors in countries of origin. This dissertation aims to examine transnational adoption from Bolivia by centralising the perspectives of families of origin, local child welfare and adoption professionals, and Bolivian adoptees. By focusing on their accounts, we gain insight into the prevailing ideologies and social mechanisms that structure the Bolivian child protection and adoption system. Particular attention is paid to the conditions and contexts in which child relinquishment, child removal and searches for relatives take place. This ethnographic study, based on an activist anthropological approach, was conducted mainly in Bolivia and draws on participant observation and in-depth interviews with more than 70 participants. The empirical findings suggest that impoverished and marginalised families who deviate from parenting ideals are more likely to become entangled in the net of the child protection system. In such cases, social investigations may be conducted on these families, which may result in their children being taken away if they do not meet the conditions set by child welfare professionals. However, these professionals are often hampered in their work by a lack of financial and material resources, which limits the conduct of research on family reunification and leads to more child removals. The study also questions the closed nature of the adoption system, which allows loopholes for irregular practices in the system despite the various safeguards and protocols put in place. In addition, the findings also point to the resistance expressed by families of origin and Bolivian adoptees in their search for restoration. The families of origin often long for information about their children, which may lead them to try to obtain information about their children or look for them themselves. In turn, Bolivian adoptees develop their own strategies to connect to their origins by seeking belonging and community. Finally, the dissertation proposes dismantling the oppressive logics and mechanisms of transnational adoption and calls for radically re-imagine new ways of caring for children and their families.

Samenvatting

Onderzoek naar transnationale adoptie heeft onvoldoende aandacht besteed aan de perspectieven van actoren in landen van herkomst. Dit proefschrift beoogt om transnationale adoptie van Bolivia te onderzoeken door de perspectieven van families van oorsprong, de lokale kindervelzijns- en adoptieprofessionals en Boliviaans geadopteerden centraal te stellen. Door te focussen op hun verhalen, krijgen we inzicht in de heersende ideologieën en sociale mechanismes van het Boliviaans kinderbescherming- en adoptiesysteem. Bijzondere aandacht gaat uit naar de omstandigheden en contexten waarin kinderafstand, uithuisplaatsing en zoektochten naar verwanten plaatsvinden. Deze etnografische studie, gebaseerd op een activistisch-antropologische benadering, vond hoofdzakelijk plaats in Bolivia en is gebaseerd op participerende observatie en diepte-interview met meer dan 70 deelnemers. De empirische bevindingen suggereren dat verarmde en gemarginaliseerde families die afwijken van ideale opvoedingsnorm meer kans lopen om in het net van kinderbescherming verstrikt te raken. In dergelijke gevallen kunnen sociale onderzoeken worden uitgevoerd naar deze families, wat kan leiden naar het uithuisplaatsen van hun kinderen als zij niet voldoen aan de voorwaarden die zijn gesteld door de kinderbeschermingsprofessionals. Deze professionals worden echter vaak belemmerd door een gebrek aan financiële en materiële middelen in hun werkzaamheden, wat de uitvoering van onderzoek naar familiehereniging beperkt en ertoe leidt dat kinderen vaker uit huis worden geplaatst. De studie stelt ook het gesloten karakter van het adoptiesysteem ter discussie dat onregelmatige praktijken in het systeem mogelijk maakt ondanks de verschillende waarborgen en protocollen die zijn. Bovendien wijzen de bevindingen ook op de weerstand van families van oorsprong en Boliviaans geadopteerden dat zij uiten in hun zoektochten naar herstel. De families van oorsprong verlangen vaak naar informatie over hun kinderen, wat ertoe kan leiden dat zij zelf proberen informatie over hun kinderen te verkrijgen of zelf op zoek te gaan naar hen. Boliviaans geadopteerden ontwikkelen op hun beurt eigen strategieën om zich verbonden te voelen met hun herkomst door het zoeken naar verbondenheid en gemeenschap. Ten slotte stelt het proefschrift voor om de onderdrukkende logica's en

mechanismen van transnationale adoptie te ontmantelen en pleit het voor een radicale herverbeelding van nieuwe manieren om voor kinderen en hun families te zorgen.

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Appendix: Informatiedocument zoektochten

A. Informatie over het onderzoeksproject

Onderzoeksproject: Kinderafstand, zoeken en herenigingen in interlandelijke adoptie uit Bolivia

Verantwoordelijk onderzoeker: Atamhi Cawayu, Onderzoekscentrum voor Cultuur en Gender, Vakgroep Talen en Culturen, Universiteit Gent.

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Inhoud van het onderzoek: Dit antropologisch onderzoek tracht te onderzoeken hoe mechanismes van kinderafstand, zoektochten en mogelijke herenigingen plaatsvinden in de context van interlandelijke adoptie uit Bolivia. Hiervoor zullen interviews afgenomen worden met de Boliviaanse moeders/families en personen die een rol hebben gespeeld in het proces van kinderafstand, adoptie of hereniging. Als onderdeel van dit onderzoek, assisteer ik ook Boliviaans geadopteerden en adoptieve families in hun zoekvraag naar contact met de Boliviaanse ouder(s) en/of andere verwanten.

Korte omschrijving van de onderzoeksmethode met geadopteerden en/of adoptiefamilies: Het onderzoek doet beroep op 'open interviews' waarbij gevraagd wordt aan de deelnemers om te vertellen over een hun interesse om al dan niet een zoektocht te starten. De onderzoeker kan hierbij eventueel bijkomende vragen stellen ter verduidelijking, verdieping of uitbreiding van het interview. De deelnemers zijn vrij om in te gaan op de vragen en kunnen het gesprek op elk moment pauzeren of stopzetten.

Discretie en anonimiteit worden verzekerd: De gesprekken zullen worden opgenomen met een dictafoon zodat deze kunnen worden uitgeschreven. Hierbij wordt de volledige anonimiteit van de deelnemer gegarandeerd en zullen namen, plaatsnamen of andere gegevens waardoor herkenbaarheid zou kunnen ontstaan, vervangen worden door

pseudoniemen of weggelaten. De transcripties zullen uitsluitend gebruikt worden voor onderzoeks- en educatieve doeleinden en worden bewaard op een beveiligde opslagplaats. Hetgeen dat wordt verteld tijdens de gesprekken is strikt vertrouwelijk en zal onder geen beding worden doorgegeven aan derden.

Rapportering: Deelnemers kunnen aangeven indien ze graag op de hoogte worden gehouden van de onderzoeksresultaten.

B. Informatie omtrent ‘zoeken’ in Bolivia

‘Zoeken’ kan verschillende zaken impliceren. Het is belangrijk om te weten naar wat men precies opzoek wil gaan. Men kan namelijk opzoek gaan naar bijvoorbeeld meer achtergrondinformatie over het pre-adoptieve adoptieverleden, informatie over de Boliviaanse ouder/verwanten of naar contact met de Boliviaanse ouder en/of andere mogelijke familieleden.

Opzoek naar informatie over pre-adoptieve verleden

In Bolivia zijn er verschillende instanties die een rol spelen in het faciliteren van interlandelijke adoptie. Deze instanties kunnen dus ook mogelijk over extra informatie beschikken. Enkele van deze instanties zijn volgende: de Centrale Autoriteit (onderdeel van het Ministerie van Justitie – afdeling: *Niñez y Personas Adultas Mayores*), kindertehuizen, de rechtbanken, en de sociale overheidsdienst die de kindertehuizen superviseert (SEDEGES).

Opzoek naar contact met de Boliviaanse ouder en/of andere familieleden

Indien men opzoek wil gaan naar mogelijk contact met de Boliviaanse moeder en/of andere familieleden, is het heel belangrijk om alle adoptiepapieren te verzamelen. Hierbij is het belangrijk dat men de papieren zo nauwkeurig mogelijk doorneemt, het kleinste detail kan namelijk van belang zijn. Hoe meer informatie er bekend is, hoe meer kans er is om opzoek te gaan naar mogelijk contact. Hoe minder informatie er is, hoe moeilijker dergelijke zoektocht wordt.

Welke instanties kunnen hierbij helpen?

De centrale autoriteit heeft de bevoegdheid om geadopteerden te ondersteunen in mogelijke zoektochten naar meer informatie over hun Boliviaanse moeder/ouders. Echter is hun kennis over ‘zoeken’ eerder beperkt en zullen zij eerder doorverwijzen naar de rechtbanken, de kindertehuizen of de bevoegde SEDEGES (sociale dienst die de publieke kindertehuizen superviseert).

Indien de geadopteerde meerderjarig is én indien een volledige naam bekend is, kan men zich richten naar volgende overheidsinstanties: SEGIP en SERECI. Hiervoor dient de geadopteerde eerst een gelegaliseerd document te bekomen, opgesteld door een advocaat, dat stelt dat de geadopteerde recht heeft op informatie over haar/zijn Boliviaanse familie en met daarin een verzoek naar desbetreffende instanties om deze informatie met de geadopteerde te delen.

Deze overheidsinstanties zijn namelijk gelijkaardig zijn met het volksregister:

- (1) Servicio General de Identificación Personal (SEGIP): beschikt over de meeste informatie, nl.: adres, ID-foto, ID-nummer, gezinssamenstelling, geboortedatum.
- (2) Servicio de Registro Civico (SERECI): heeft toegang tot de geboortedatum, ID-nummer en de buurt waar de persoon voor het laatst is gaan stemmen.
- (3) Indien men beschikt over de volledige naam en ID-nummer, kan men via deze website (<https://yoparticipo.oep.org.bo>) ook achterhalen waar dat men voor de laatste keer is gaan stemmen

C. Mijn werkwijze bij het assisteren van mogelijke zoekvragen

Zoekvraag als deel van het doctoraatsonderzoek

Aangezien mijn onderzoek focust op kinderafstand, zoeken en herenigingen in interlandelijke adoptie uit Bolivia, is het mogelijk om een deel van mijn onderzoek te wijden aan het assisteren van geadopteerden en adoptiefamilies in het zoeken naar contact met de mogelijke Boliviaanse ouder(s)/verwanten. Dit impliceert dat de contacten met de adoptiefamilie en de assistentie in de zoekvraag ook deel worden van het doctoraatsonderzoek. Hierdoor zal gevraagd worden om de gesprekken met de adoptiefamilie/geadopteerde op te nemen met een audio-recorder. Indien de Boliviaanse verwanten gevonden worden, zal ook aan hen uitgelegd worden dat de zoektocht deel is van een groter onderzoek waarin de ervaringen van Boliviaanse families centraal staan.

Kennismaking

Alvorens ik start met een zoekvraag, vind ik het belangrijk om kennis te maken met de geadopteerde en de adoptiefamilie. Dit kan doormiddel van een video-gesprek. Via een kennismakingsgesprek kan ik rustig de werkwijze bespreken en kan de adoptiefamilie uitgebreid vertellen over hun zoekvraag en welke informatie er al dan niet is. Hierbij zal gevraagd worden om het gesprek op te nemen. Indien beide partijen akkoord zijn om door te gaan, wordt gevraagd om alle beschikbare informatie, foto's, scans door te sturen zodat deze grondig kunnen worden doorgenomen.

Zoeken in Bolivia

Voor het uitvoeren van mijn veldwerk, verblijf ik gedurende verschillende periodes in Bolivia. Dit geeft mij de mogelijkheid om in Bolivia actief opzoek te gaan naar mogelijke

verwanten. Echter, het uitvoeren van zoektochten is niet evident. Dit kan gepaard gaan met wantrouwen van de lokale bevolking als van de Boliviaanse familie. Wanneer ik op verplaatsing moet voor een zoektocht, verkies ik om samen te werken met een onderzoeksassistent die me hierin bijstaat. Tijdens een zoektocht tracht ik zo goed mogelijk de geadopteerde of adoptiefamilie op de hoogte te brengen van de zoektocht. Indien gevonden wordt, wordt gevraagd om de gesprekken op te nemen. Dit niet alleen voor onderzoeksdoeleinden, maar ook voor het delen van deze informatie met de geadopteerde/adoptiefamilie (d.m.v. transcriptie en audio).

Opvolging

Na afloop van de zoektocht wordt teruggekoppeld met de geadopteerde/adoptiefamilie. Wanneer er geen contact gemaakt kon worden met de Boliviaanse ouder(s) /verwanten, wordt alle informatie gedeeld die men heeft kunnen verzamelen. Wanneer er wel contact gemaakt kon worden, dan wordt eveneens alle informatie en contactgegevens (mits toestemming Boliviaanse familie) gedeeld. Vervolgens zal ook worden opgevolgd hoe het contact verloopt tussen geadopteerde/adoptiefamilie en Boliviaanse ouder(s), andere verwanten.

Onkosten

Het assisteren van geadopteerden/adoptiefamilies in mogelijke zoekvragen is deel van mijn onderzoek/werk. Hierdoor vraag ik geen vergoeding voor de tijd en energie die ik spendeer aan een zoekvraag. Wel vraag ik voor een onkostenvergoeding indien mijn onderzoeksassistent en ik op verplaatsing moeten (zelf ben ik gebaseerd in La Paz). Deze onkostenvergoeding houdt voornamelijk in: verblijf en transport (vliegtuig, bus, taxi).

