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The right to identify one's ancestors: why the notion of 'limping parentage' is increasingly relevant to origin deprivation

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For adoptees, genetic relatedness matters: put bluntly, for many of us there is a need - urgent or chronic - to identify one's ancestors. Arguably, this goes well beyond the normative curiosity of those non-adopted 'kept' persons who might perhaps wonder about their genetic origins and seek to compile detailed family histories or bloodline 'pedigrees.' For the origin deprived, the sharp losses of natal disconnection can easily translate into a dangerous lack of medical information, early emotional damage, or long term psychological harm. And yet, the act of searching for – or indeed making contact with – lost biological relatives is still sometimes seen as highly controversial. This is so whether or not some form of kin reunion - or even cultural repatriation - is the ultimate aim of those who actively seek out basic information, uneasy answers, or a more visible form of 'familial' connectedness. Systemic injustices are still enabled by the various legal devices that tend to copper fasten exclusion, disenfranchisement, and a harsh othering, often disregarding entirely the human rights of those who been so exiled. Vetoes, closed or falsified birth records, and gamete donor anonymity, all speak to wider, lingering fears over unwanted stranger-kin contact and the dangers of the unknown relative.

That said, slow progress is being made via gradual acknowledgement of the adverse consequences of genetic identity loss, with the notion of 'limping parentage' being increasingly denounced as harmful (albeit in surrogacy situations). Though grounded in the injustices of delay and uncertainty - rather than permanent exclusion from kinship - the concept of being legally parentless remains relevant to those who were adopted or donor-conceived. To be deprived of origin in this manner is to be so 'othered' as to be essentially rights-less in terms of one's family life, original identity, or indeed perhaps nationality. The sense of having some unpaid 'existential debt' (Bauer, 2020) to one's ancestors means however that an unfair subordination of fundamental rights must occur to protect genitor interests (whether these are tied, for example, to privacy or property). In other words, the usually temporary socio-legal limbo that some surrogate-born infants find themselves in, likely resonates with those affected by vetoes, or sealed or falsified birth records. Our shared vulnerabilities arise from non-ancestry - and a deliberately engineered socio-legal otherness – which together fail to address the innate human need for genetic kinship and familial connections.