

# Out of the Fog and into Consciousness

## *A Model of Adoptee Awareness*

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### ABSTRACT

Critical consciousness models illuminate processes by which marginalized groups develop awareness, both individually and collectively, about oppressive systems and structures in order to ultimately engage in activism for social justice. One marginalized group, adoptees, have relied on “out of the fog” language to delineate emergent adoptee awareness of the impact of adoption to include systemic problematic practices. The adoptee consciousness model, templated from Anzaldúa’s *conocimiento* process, moves beyond emergent awareness to describe the ongoing individual and collective movement toward social activism that adoptees may encounter throughout their lifespan. The model is conceptualized with five touchstones within the spiral: 1) status quo, 2) rupture, 3) dissonance, 4) expansiveness, and 5) forgiveness and activism. The model considers intersecting racial, ethnic, and cultural identities while also promoting empathy for adoptees wherever they are on the spiral of adoptee consciousness, and informs body-inclusive therapists working with adoptees’ somatic needs.

**Keywords:** critical consciousness, adoptees, social activism, adoptee consciousness, body-inclusive therapists

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**Y**ou are no longer who you used to be. As you move from past presuppositions and frames of reference, letting go of former positions, you feel like an orphan, abandoned by all that’s familiar. Exposed, naked, disoriented, wounded, uncertain, confused and conflicted, you’re forced to live en la orilla – a razor-sharp edge that fragments you.

— Gloria E. Anzaldúa

*This Bridge We Call Home:*

*Radical Visions for Transformation*

“  
... adoptee experience  
of consciousness may trigger  
adoptee-related somatic and  
psychological responses  
that merit somatic healing.”

The development of a critical consciousness has deep roots among oppressed and marginalized peoples (Freire, 1970). More than merely becoming educated or attuned to one’s oppression, critical consciousness suggests a call to action and political activism on multiple levels, including as an individual as well as part of a community (Diem-

er, 2020). Research examining consciousness development among a variety of marginalized populations proliferated in the past decade (Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Mosley et al., 2020; Pillen et al., 2020; Uriostegui et al., 2020). However, the process of consciousness has not been critically examined among adoptee populations. Despite the broader social narrative of adoption as a heartwarming way to provide for the “best interests of the child,” adoption practices have historically included actions that many adoptees find harmful, including prohibiting access to their own birth and adoption records, separating siblings (including twin or triplet siblings), discouraging adoptive parents from engaging in open relationships with the child’s family of origin, placing children transracially and transnationally into homes where their racial, ethnic, and culture of origins are minimized or erased, enforced assimilation (e.g., Indian Adoption Project), and prioritizing placement into non-relative homes over relatives (Carp, 2004, 2014; Herman, 2009; Thibeault & Spencer, 2019).

Adoptees have been at the forefront of political activism and legal and systemic reform to address these historical injustices (Carp, 2004, 2014). In this article, we define critical consciousness and its origins, and explore how consciousness unfolds within the adoptee community, an under-examined and marginalized group. We also discuss implications for adoptees in general, and body-inclusive therapists specifically. We recognize that the adoptee experience of consciousness may trigger adoptee-related somatic and psychological responses that merit somatic healing. Our goal as a group of adoptee-scholars is to use our professional, personal, and community activist experiences and lenses to propose a theoretical model of adoptee consciousness. The model may serve as a framework to support body-inclusive therapists understanding of adoptee experiences so as to inform their treatment approaches.

A note about terminology: debates about adoption language have led to the creation of Positive Adoption Language (PAL) and Honest Adoption Language (HAL). Positive Adoption Language was created to reduce negative associations about adoption, yet is adoption microfiction (Baden, 2016; Butterbaugh, 2013; Myers, 2014). Examples of PAL include using terms like “birthmother” instead of “natural mother,” or saying their birth/first parent “made an adoption plan” rather than

“abandoned” or “gave up.” Those advocating for PAL tend to be adoption professionals and adoptive parents who argue that PAL reduces stigma associated with adoption. However, critics have countered that PAL serves to sanitize and benefit adoptive parents by enacting their parenting as more legitimate than the birth/first family, and silencing adoptees and birth/first parents. Some terms are contested; for example, the term “birth parent.” In this paper, we choose to use birth/first parent to acknowledge the different identifiers the birth/first parent community uses, and we acknowledge that some may use a different term. We also recognize that the term “adoptee” is not universally accepted.

## Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire’s seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), delineated a model whereby members of marginalized and oppressed groups develop awareness, or consciousness, of the institutional and societal structures that maintain their oppression, and engage in activism to dismantle the status quo. Freire (1970) indicated that critical consciousness emerges with problem identification, continues with the deep reflection that initiates motivation for change, and ultimately brings forth transformation and liberation. Important concepts include generative themes, or those words or issues that matter the most to marginalized persons; codes, which are the related events or words connected to the general themes that ignite learning and motivation to act; and dialogue, where oppressed persons have equal collaboration and partnership in problem identification and eventual transformation (Foley, 2021; Freire, 1970). Critical consciousness research has examined how awareness of socio-political and cultural oppression influence those in marginalized and minoritized positions to engage in individual and collectivistic action (Diemer et al. 2016; Diemer et al., 2021; Lee & Haskins, 2022; Mosley et al., 2020; Uriostegui et al., 2020).

Models of critical consciousness explore how individuals and groups develop socio-political awareness of oppressive structures, and then move to community action to disrupt them. For example, Martin-Baró outlined an anti-oppressive theory, Liberation Psychology, centered on exposing the voices of marginalized clients via a process of

conscientization, “the awakening of critical consciousness,” to enact transformational change (Torres Rivera, 2020, p. 46). More recently, Mosley and colleagues (2020) explored the process by which Black Lives Matter (BLM) leaders developed critical consciousness as a buffer from racial trauma. Specifically, they noted BLM leaders first witnessed racism and/or experienced racial trauma, which initiated self-reflection to process the experience, and culminated in individual and collective action against anti-Black racism. A systematic content analysis of 20 critical consciousness research studies spanning 1970 through 2017 revealed a general synthesis of consciousness development (Pillen et al., 2020). The framework described included the following: “1) priming of critical reflection, 2) information creating disequilibrium, 3) introspection, 4) revisiting frames of reference, and developing agency for change and acting against oppression” (p. 1519).

Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa described coming into consciousness as a seven-stage process she calls *conocimiento* (literally translated as knowledge), in which individuals move through a process of deconstructing what they thought they knew toward a higher consciousness as a form of decolonization (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2013).

The process of consciousness includes:

1. *El arrebato*, the initial rupture that occurs when we are confronted with the realization of what we thought we knew was false
2. *Nepantla*, or feeling torn between our previous self and our new knowledge
3. *Coatlicue*, confronting the pain of new knowledge
4. *El compromiso*, a process of letting go of the former self in order to prepare for the next stage of consciousness
5. *Coyolxauhqui*, the act of reconstruction, often accompanied by the act of writing new stories and narratives
6. *Growing, changing, being mindful and thoughtful* of those who do not share our perspectives
7. *Acting out the vision* – forgiveness and activism

Anzaldúa’s consciousness process emphasized tolerating ambiguity as one straddles the borderland territory of belonging to neither one world nor the

other, and, at the same time, belonging to both. Additionally, Anzaldúa encouraged the development of empathy and respect for both worlds as a buffer from divisiveness.

## Out of the Fog

In her seminal work *Lost and Found*, Betty Jean Lifton (1979) highlighted how adoptees may experience “waking up from the great sleep” (p. 71) to describe the adopted person’s awareness of repressed feelings and thoughts related to their lived experiences, often perpetuated by closed systems and communication. According to Lifton, the awakening is a period when adoptees are asking themselves, “at what point did they give up and go along with the prevailing system, as if sensing intuitively that acquiescence meant emotional survival, and struggle meant disequilibrium?” (1979, p. 71). The awakening ushers in a period of searching for identity markers, including birth family, and information gathering. Since publishing *Lost and Found*, Lifton’s belief that adoption is often enshrouded in a “veil” of opaque silence and secrecy has been widely echoed (1979, p. 16). Of its origins, Evans (2016) suggested:

“In the years since Lifton’s book was published in 1979, the idea of the great sleep has evolved into a fog: the sense that some folks connected with adoption are in a fog, not wanting or able to see the clear, full reality of adoption (para 4).”

Regardless of the origins of out-of-the-fog terminology, it is ubiquitous among adoptee-led blogs and social media influencers, and exemplifies the type of generative-themed language, per Freire (1970), that is deeply meaningful to many in the adoptee community. For example, Bruce (2021) stated: “The term ‘being in the fog’ is often used to describe the way adoptees feel, think, operate and relate before they come out of the denial, conditioning and ignorance that cloaks the impacts of adoption.” Similarly, Pittman (2020) suggested:

The phrase “coming out of the fog” refers to adoptees coming to terms with feelings—often suppressed [sic] emotions—and realizations about adoption and their adoption experience. It is an awareness that evolves, or comes on slowly, that the reality of the adoption experience may not fit the mold society or adoptive families have constructed for adoptees (para 4).

Tucker (2020) further expands upon the “out of the fog” terminology by enfolding concepts relevant to transracial and transnational adoptees:

“It’s then allowing yourself to go further and begin to critique the ways that you became part of a system that is predicated on [#saviorism](#), racism and the underlying belief that your birth parents aren’t good enough.”

## Moving Beyond the Fog

“Out of the fog” allows adoptees the opportunity to critically explore adoption-related dominant narratives that may no longer be held true. Such examinations may bring forth a period of deep reflection and questioning of the adoption as a “win-win” (Baden, 2016). Coming “out of the fog” sets the stage for adoptee consciousness. For example, Newton (2022) described their journey through a trauma of consciousness where they uncovered the socio-political realities of their unique transnational adoption, paired with the realization of oppression towards others with a shared identity. Newton’s (2022) conceptualization also accounts for adoptee re-examination of racial identity now situated within a new awareness. The trauma of consciousness paves the way for a new paradigm of adoptee critical consciousness encompassing adoption-related and socio-cultural and political identities.

Outside of Newton’s account, little literature exists on the ongoing process once adoptees move past the veil, as described by Lifton (1979). Reculturation (Baden et al., 2012), or the process of reclaiming birth culture for transracial and transnational adoptees, suggests five phases:

1. Enculturation in birth country
2. Relinquishment and temporary care
3. Adoption when enculturation stops and assimilation begins
4. Immigration (for transnational adoptees)
5. Assimilation continues,
6. Reculturation

Baden et al. (2012) emphasized that reculturation may commence when transracial and transnational adoptees explore the world out of the protective “White honorary status” (p. 393) of their adoptive families. Reculturation primarily occurs via three modes to include (1) education, (2) experience, and

(3) immersion. The reconstruction model of Penny et al. (2007) is similar in creating distinct “phases” of adoptees’ awareness, including (1) no awareness/denying awareness, (2) emerging awareness, (3) drowning in awareness, (4) re-emerging from awareness, and (5) finding peace.

Our model conceptualizes the process as a spiral rather than a stage model, thus allowing for a fluid and non-static journey. These different touchstones may create spaces for adoptees to further their own identity, as well as form community with like-minded others, often as a means of challenging the dominant narratives about adoptees and adoption.

## Adoptees and Trauma

Body-inclusive therapists often collaborate with clients who seek to alleviate trauma-related symptoms, many of which are experienced both psychologically and somatically. The adoption experience itself is replete with varying degrees of traumatic events spanning from pre- to postadoption status. Brodzinsky et al. (2022) describe three potential risk areas for trauma in the lifespan of adoptees, including neurobiological impacts on brain development and functioning: (1) preadoption adverse experiences, including neglect and abuse, (2) postadoption recovery of early life adverse experiences, largely predicated on adoptive parenting, and (3) contextual factors contributing to the lived experience of adoption as traumatic. Specifically, to the adoption lived experience as traumatic, Brodzinsky et al. (2022) state:

When their adoption experiences and feelings are ignored or disrespected, and when there is a lack of support by key people in their lives for exploring the meaning of being adopted, it can lead to feelings of marginalization, diminishment, fragmentation of self, and emotional destabilization. And, for some, it can also feel traumatic (p. 7).

To this end, in their autoethnographic research, Samuels (2022) extrapolates on the experiences of transracial adoptee status as epistemic trauma. The distinct type of traumatic experience is one defined by numerous scholars of color, including Anzaldúa (1987), as the discrediting, undermining, or diminishing of individuals and entire populations as “knowers” and credible information hold-

ers of their own lived experiences. Samuels (2022) outlines their own preadoptive adverse experiences, postadoption experiences of racism, and adoption microaggressions (Baden, 2016), and their professional quest via research and exploration of the transracial adoption experience. These experiences, viewed through the lens of “hermeneutical smothering – the deployment of dominant meanings that drown out, distort, or obscure one’s own meaning-making process” (p. 5), underscore the injustice embedded within the lived experience of their transracial adoption experience. Newton’s (2022) description of the trauma associated with their consciousness process illuminates how consciousness may trigger adoptees in a variety of somatic ways. For example, sleep disturbances (Askeland, 2020), dissociation (Vinke, 2020), and eating disorders (Rossman et al., 2020) can be potentially manifested parallel to consciousness. Merritt (2022) describes their experiences uncovering latent trauma held implicitly within their body from their adoption as an infant.

It is important to highlight how traditional mental health therapists themselves can be harmful to adoptees seeking treatment, as evidenced by practices collectively known as “attachment therapy” (Chaffin et al. 2006; Haney, 2021). Adoptee children, adolescents, and those within the foster care system who are unable to consent to participate are often vulnerable targets. Attachment therapies purport to address “attachment disorders” and/or reactive attachment disorder, yet no scientific basis or evidence has demonstrated their efficacy (Chaffin et al., 2006; Haney, 2021). Practices such as holding, rebirthing, and rage induction use physical coercion of the adoptee by the practitioner and adoptive family members to “correct” perceived unhealthy attachment strategies (Haney, 2021; Mercer., 2014; Stryker, 2010). Adoptees who have been forced to participate in attachment therapy under duress are frequently traumatized by the practice itself, and may be especially hesitant to engage in any form of mental health treatment as adults.

### Reflexivity

We identify as transracial, transnational, cisgender female adoptees. Individually and collectively, we began a journey towards awareness of adoption-related institutions, systems, and practices

many years ago. Four of us met as a full group in 2011 at a transracial adoptee-centered event, and have continued to collaborate over the years. Our personal, individual, and collective critical consciousness development narratives informed this model.

### Adoptee Consciousness Model

Our conceptualization of a process of adoptee consciousness is best thought of as a spiral in which touchstones or turning points propel the adoptee to a different aspect of consciousness, rather than a linear set of stages with a “final” or desired outcome. We patterned our model after Anzaldúa’s process of consciousness, given their unique emphasis on navigating dual identities, similar to the adoptee experience, as well as their call for respect for those in all levels of consciousness. As adoptees of color, we were intentional in drawing upon scholar-activists of color to develop our framework.

The dotted lines in the model (see Figure 1) represent pathways between touchstones. Individuals can and often do move between these touchstones in non-linear ways. For example, some adoptees who encounter a rupture may experience slight dissonance and decide to go back to status quo. Other adoptees may go through parts of this spiral process, or the entire spiral, multiple times over the life course, prompted by different touchstones. Most adoptees do not settle in and remain in just one period of consciousness through their lives.

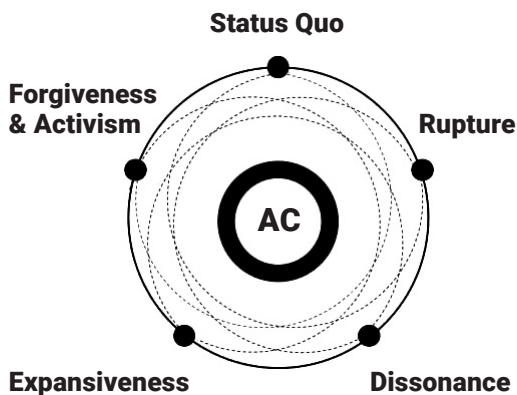


Figure 1: Adoptee Consciousness model

Touchstone or turning point	Definition	Example
Status Quo	Believing the dominant narrative of adoption, which employs only affirmative or asset-based perspectives about adoption. Does not or will not question individual or structural factors leading to adoption.	The adoptee sees adoption as a blessing. May see life as so much better than it would have been if they hadn't been adopted. Their actions support the dominant paradigms about adoption; for example, participating in panels at adoption agencies representing the "grateful adoptee." They may participate in social media defending adoption practices.
Rupture (El arrebato)	Encountering information or experiencing an incident or event that disrupts the status quo. Discovers own or others' adoption information is inaccurate, false, unethical, and/or illegal. For transracial adoptees as they may realize they are seen as BIPOC despite internal identification as White.	The adoptee may shut down and reject evidence or may decide to dive deeper. They may become even more committed to the dominant narrative of adoption, and may reject or feel threatened by adoptees who they see as "angry" or disruptive.
Dissonance (Nepantla and coatlicue)	The tension or contradiction between what seems to be opposing beliefs or truths. Adoptees experiencing dissonance may feel emotional pain, anguish, anger, angst, or dysregulation from the awareness brought to light during the rupture.	The adoptee feels torn between multiple identities, and struggles to see the both / and aspects of adoption. Adoptees may seek community spaces to validate their positions, but may struggle with boundaries to articulate their positions as they are still negotiating where they fit in with this newfound information. Many adoptees walking through dissonance may want to participate in social activities with adoptees, as long as the group refrains from more political discussions about adoption.
Expansiveness (el compromiso, coyolxauhqui)	Sitting in the paradox, adoptees are able to see multiple perspectives, and be mindful and thoughtful of those who do not share their perspective. Adoptees at this touchstone are learning to tolerate the discomfort the paradox may initially create.	The adoptee chooses to acknowledge the social injustices that are inherent in adoption. The adoptee may join communities of other like-minded individuals to elevate a more complex understanding of adoption, create adoptee-centric art, and engage politically in adoptee-centric activism.
	This is a time of re-invention and/or re-incorporation of their multiple selves, seeing themselves intersectionally rather than being forced into one identity.	The adoptee can give up the aspects of the former beliefs that do not work to serve them anymore (dominant narrative) without feeling they are giving up their whole identity or self.



Touchstone or turning point	Definition	Example
Forgiveness & Activism	Extrapolating beyond oneself; noting systemic oppression in adoption practices and history. The individual begins the process of forgiveness when needed, and commits to challenging the dominant narrative.	The adoptee can forgive their adoptive parents for not knowing better, can understand it is a mechanism of the adoption industrial complex that upholds dominant narratives about gender roles and family procreation, and holds others accountable when needed. The adoptee continues to collaborate with other adoptees in advocacy in activism to dismantle adoption oppression (i.e., adoptee citizenship legislation, postadoption services, etc.).

**Table 1:** *Adoptee Consciousness process definitions*

### Touchstone: Status Quo

The current dominant narrative about adoption is that adoption is a feel-good solution to a problem. According to Baden (2016), dominant narratives can often also be classified as microfictions or purposely “deceptive practices” that shield adoptees from accurate adoption information (p. 8). In the status quo narrative, adoption is seen as an individual action undertaken without any systemic or cultural influence. Those who adopt are seen as rescuing a child whose only other alternative would be to languish in foster care or an orphanage. If a birth/first family is ever factored into this dominant narrative, they are cast as brave, self-sacrificing individuals who want a better life for their child than they think they can provide, or they are seen as negligent and abusive individuals who do not deserve to be parents. Adoptees who believe in the status quo narrative do not question or critique structural factors that lead to adoption; adoption is considered solely from an individual and micro-level perspective. Adoptees may reference, believe, or use Positive Adoption Language (Butterbaugh, 2013; Myers, 2014). When referencing their own or others’ adoptions, they may use language such as: feeling special, grateful, or lucky to have been adopted; embracing the sentiment that their first parents “loved them so much they made an adoption plan,” or believing dominant myths about why children are in need of adoption. If someone critiques adoption, adoptees believing the status quo narrative might respond with dom-

inant binary counterpoints (i.e., the alternative to adoption is abortion; adoption is better than remaining in foster care or “languishing” in orphanages). Adoptees in the status quo mindset may also become easily offended or defensive if adoption is not framed from an asset lens. They may subscribe to their beliefs about adoption solely based on a desire to align with their adoptive family’s narrative because they do not feel the need or feel safe to explore what adoption means for them individually (aligning with Marcia’s (1966) identity foreclosure in which an individual commits to an identity without exploring other options). Adoptees may seek spaces and opportunities to be the “model adoptee” where they can be lauded and affirmed by adoptive parents.

The dominant adoption narrative minimizes the disruption of the adoptees’ first family and the adoptees’ preadoption experiences; adoptees who believe in the status quo narrative agree with the belief that adoptees are a blank slate or *tabula rasa*, and argue that environmental (adoptive family) factors shape an adoptee more than their genetic or hereditary (first/birth family) history. As a result, they may attack adoptees with different experiences on social media platforms, write opinion pieces defending adoption, write books and articles about their own “successful” adoption, be asked by and comply with adoptive parents to defend controversial practices in favor of adoption or adoptive families, or work to maintain adoption practices that fit with the dominant narrative.

## Touchstone: Rupture

At some point, many adoptees encounter information that challenges the status quo. Anzaldúa calls this a period when a person experiences a rupture (arrebato), fragmentation, or wounding that forces them to rethink what they know about who they and/or others are who upheld the dominant narrative/status quo. The initial seismic shifts are followed by aftershocks, as when an adoptee thinks they have found an answer or resolution to this disruptive information, only to be confronted with another event or piece of information. For example, an adoptee learns the information about their relinquishment or adoption is false, or perhaps they learn their adoption was unethical or illegal (Branco, 2021). Or they might learn information about the history and practices of adoption that challenges their beliefs. The rupture might occur when an adoptee meets another adoptee who experienced abuse at the hands of their adoptive parents. Transracial adoptees may experience rupture when they encounter racial, ethnic, or adoption microaggressions within or outside the adoptive family home. The rupture, according to Pillen et al. (2020), is when information creates a sense of disequilibrium. When disrupting information is revealed, adoptees may shut down and reject the information, or they may choose to dive deeper and explore. Adoptees who reject the information may “double down” on public actions in favor of the dominant narrative of adoption. However, others may begin active exploration by starting to read adoptee authors, view adoptee-centered films, or participate in adoptee-centric community spaces.

## Touchstone: Dissonance

Once adoptees confront a rupture to their status quo belief, there is potential for the adoptee to experience dissonance if they choose to explore the information at the center of the rupture. Dissonance is tension or contradiction between what seem to be opposing beliefs or truths. Adoptees experiencing dissonance may feel emotional pain, anguish, anger, angst, or dysregulation from the awareness brought to light during the rupture. They may also become overwhelmed and feel stuck in limbo, torn between multiple identities, and/or both drawn to and fearful of other adoptees. For example, an adoptee may begin to empathize with first/birth parents who were coerced into relinquishing chil-

dren for adoption, but refuse to believe their own first/birth parent was coerced. Or an adoptee acknowledges that adoption involves loss, but thinks that adoptees who believe adoption is traumatic are “angry” adoptees. Adoptees in dissonance struggle to see the both/and aspects of adoption. A transracial or transnational adoptee may internally identify as White, and feel uncomfortable when others consider them as a member of the Black, Indigenous or People of Color community. Adoptees living through dissonance may push back against others who point out the injustices or participate in adoptee activism, and may seek spaces and opportunities to be the “grateful” or “model” adoptee where they can be lauded and affirmed by adoptive parents. In doing so, they may also participate in defensive behaviors in online or other spaces as they attempt to figure out their own position about adoption. Adoptees may notice emergent adoptive parent resentment and/or jealousy towards their birth/first families, and feel stuck trying to navigate between speaking up or staying quiet to protect their adoptive parents’ feelings. Adoptees may seek community spaces in which to validate their positions, but may struggle with boundaries or articulating their positions as they are still trying to understand how they fit in with this newfound information. Many adoptees walking through dissonance may want to participate in social activities with adoptees, if the group refrains from more political discussions about adoption.

## Touchstone: Expansiveness

When adoptees begin to explore the paradoxes inherent in adoption (Lee, 2003), they can discard aspects of the former beliefs that no longer serve them (dominant narrative) without feeling they are giving up their entire identity or self. Expansiveness is a time of re-invention and/or re-incorporation of adoptees’ multiple selves, seeing themselves intersectionally and rejecting attempts to force them into a singular identity. The work of expansiveness is about being able to embrace both/and related to adoption, and learning to tolerate the discomfort that recognizing the adoption paradox may initially create. Adoptees embracing expansiveness are often quite generative, diving into projects addressing adoption from an adoptee-centric perspective. Such projects may involve artistic statements like painting and playwriting, the creation of new oral histories through pod-



casts, or written work, including poetry, blogs, and memoirs. Whichever avenue adoptees pursue, these creative expressions allow the adoptee to integrate new awarenesses into their identity, reconstruct their narrative, and tell their story on their terms. Divisiveness may still occur at this touchstone; as adoptees work to solidify their point of view and values related to adoption discourse and practices, they may not realize other adoptees before them have also done this work, and think of their newfound enlightenment as unique. In this current age of social media, much of the seminal work by adoptees may not be accessed as easily as modern social media platforms.

### **Touchstone: Forgiveness and activism**

The individual begins the process of forgiveness (compromiso) when needed (i.e., they may forgive their adoptive parents for not knowing better, understanding it is a mechanism of the adoption industrial complex), and also holds others accountable when needed (i.e., still wanting their adoptive parents to acknowledge their role in upholding the system). During this touchstone, the adoptee actively chooses to acknowledge the social injustices inherent in adoption. Many adoptees embracing forgiveness work towards building empathy and respect, in place of defensiveness or divisiveness, for adoptees holding dissimilar or contradictory beliefs. Activism in this touchstone can take on various forms to include anti-adoption discrimination efforts such as petitioning for open birth certificate access legislation, examining transnational and domestic illicit adoption past and present practices, and repealing and replacing inequitable transnational adoptee citizenship laws.

### **Intra-Community Division**

Newton (2022) called out how the process of consciousness risks potential divisiveness within adoptee communities themselves. Specifically, Newton warns:

Adoptees already face divisive labels, such as angry and maladjusted compared with grateful, that pit members of our community against one another. Whether from existing classifications or new ones, avoiding these binary distinctions is essential, because they do not acknowledge

the full spectrum of experiences that encompass the adoptee identity or allow room for change over time (2022, p. 8)

Friere (1970) also warned of internal conflict and division as a tool of the oppressor to hinder potential actions towards liberation and social justice. We advocate adoptees reject a framework of scarcity, acknowledging there are many ways for adoptees to collectively build adoptee-centric programs, organizations, tools, and creative works. As an example, we acknowledge the work done by adoptee ancestors we referenced in this article as foundational and integral to providing language and frameworks that serve as a basis for our view. We hope others will find this model of adoptee consciousness helpful as a framework for further development. By templating Anzaldúa, our adoptee consciousness model emphasizes building empathy to embrace all perspectives, and to include those in status quo and across the consciousness journey. Such understanding buffers against coercion, conflict, and division by promoting acceptance, and ultimately encouraging solidarity as a unified adoptee community.

### **Discussion, Implications, Future Research**

The adoptee consciousness process describes touchstones leading to adoptee awareness of oppressive structures and practices in adoption to include heightened awareness of the adoptee's intersecting identities. The consciousness process offers a framework by which adoptees and stakeholders may build awareness, and identify and normalize their experiences within the various touchstones encountered. Such a framework is especially relevant in the era of increased societal awareness of racial, ethnic, and sociocultural structural oppression. This consciousness model is important as adoptees encounter rupture at earlier ages through social media content, reels, and other platforms. Within adoption, there is a tendency to want everything to be conflict-free, and those in an adoptee's life may misunderstand or pathologize the consciousness process as being overly dramatic, angry, ungrateful, or contrary. In addition, many adoptees may already be reluctant to speak of the consciousness process for fear of being rejected, invalidated, or dismissed. Therefore, it is crucial for stakeholders, including adoptees and

body-inclusive therapists specifically, to actively support rather than diminish, suppress, or subjugate the process. We offer recommendations to support stakeholders below.

## Adoptees

- Adoptees may, as part of the process of consciousness, distance themselves from those who question or are unsupportive when they “suddenly” are critical of, or question, previous views, or begin to apply broader critical frameworks (i.e., critical race theory, capitalism, colonization) to adoption. For adoptees: embrace the process, acknowledge the distancing as a protective measure during this phase of the consciousness journey.
- Adoptees undergoing the critical consciousness process may experience a myriad of emotional and somatic states. We encourage them to seek out support via individual adoption-informed mental health providers, including body-inclusive therapists, to support healing. Seek out adoptee support networks to normalize and validate the consciousness process.
- Adoptees in the critical consciousness process may also publicly share insights and ideas about problematic practices in adoption as a form of expansiveness and social activism. We encourage and celebrate knowledge dissemination, with a reminder to acknowledge adoptee activist ancestors by citing their work when sharing ideas or commentary. For an adoptee just beginning the consciousness process, what may be “new” knowledge to them could also be work that should be accredited to an adoptee activist ancestor.

## Body-Inclusive Therapists

- Explore and examine personal bias and values surrounding adoption stereotypes, myths, and stigma associated with adoptees, first/birth parents, and adoption in general (Branco Alvarado, 2013).
- Ensure adoptive status is included in the intake process (Branco Alvarado, 2013).
- Broach the topic of adoptee clients’ experiences of adoption, with attention to varying racial, cultural, ethnic, and other salient intersecting identities (Branco Alvarado, 2013).

- Be aware of the potential for adult adoptee clients to experience traumas as a result of forced and harmful “attachment therapy” practices they survived during childhood or adolescence.
- Utilize the adoptee consciousness model when conceptualizing where an adoptee client may be on the spiral.
- Assess for pre- and postadoption adverse and traumatic events, including attunement to the adoptee’s lived experience of adoption as traumatic (Brodzinsky et al., 2022). Seek to become adoption-informed practitioners, particularly as it pertains to addressing pre- and postadoption experiences of trauma.
- Acknowledge the consciousness process itself can be experienced as traumatic by some adoptees (Newton, 2022) at various touchstones along the consciousness model spiral.
- Consider the impact of transracial and transnational adoptee identity on psychological and somatic experiences of racism and racial trauma.
- Develop an understanding of ambiguous loss frameworks (Boss, 1999). The ambiguous loss framework not only supports the adoptee, but also encourages family members, significant others, adoption professionals, and mental health therapists to tolerate the ambiguity as well in solidarity with the adoptee.
- Avoid both pathologizing adoptees during the consciousness process and engaging in adoptee microaggressions (Baden, 2016).

## Conclusion

Critical consciousness is a natural aspect of individual and collective development for adoptees. Models of critical consciousness include Freire’s work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), liberation psychology (Torres Rivera, 2020), and the generalized model of Pillen et al. (2020). We applied Anzaldúa’s *conocimiento/consciousness* process (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2013) as a template for an adoptee consciousness model to describe how adoptees move past “the fog” into awareness of structural and systemic oppressive systems embedded in adoption practice. Pre- and postadoption adverse experiences, the lived experience of adoption itself (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; Samuels, 2022), and the consciousness process may be experienced as traumatic by some adoptees (Newton, 2022). Body-in-

clusive therapists can offer appropriate support and healing interventions. The adoptee consciousness model describes a spiral process ranging from status quo to forgiveness and activism. Crucially,

the model emphasizes an examination of adoptee intersecting identities to include racial, ethnic, and cultural paired with empathy towards all adoptees, regardless of where they are in the process.

### Disclosure

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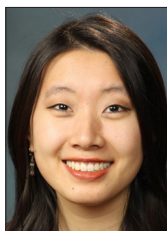
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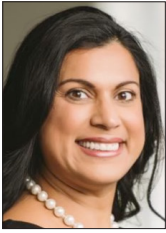
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