

## **Out of the Fog and into Consciousness: A Model of Adoptee Awareness**

Susan F. Branco<sup>1</sup>, JaeRan Kim<sup>2</sup>, Grace Newton<sup>3</sup>, Stephanie Kripa Cooper-Lewter<sup>4</sup>, and Paula O'Loughlin<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Counselor Education, St. Bonaventure University

<sup>2</sup>School of Social Work and Criminal Justice, University of Washington Tacoma

<sup>3</sup>Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis

<sup>4</sup>Social Worker and Executive Coach

<sup>5</sup>Education Consultant

### **Author Note**

Susan Branco  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0414-8921>

We have no known conflicts of interests to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Susan Branco, Counselor Education, St. Bonaventure University, B52 Plassmann, Box AB, 3261 West State Road, St. Bonaventure, NY, 14778. Email: [sbranco@sbu.edu](mailto:sbranco@sbu.edu); JaeRan Kim, School of Social Work and Criminal Justice, University of Washington Tacoma. Email: [kimjr@uw.edu](mailto:kimjr@uw.edu); Grace Newton, Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis. Email: [gracenewton@wustl.edu](mailto:gracenewton@wustl.edu)

**Abstract**

Critical consciousness models illuminate processes by which marginalized groups develop awareness about oppressive systems and structures both individually and collectively 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 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.

*Key words:* critical consciousness, adoptees, social activism, adoptee consciousness

### **Out of the Fog and into Consciousness: A Model of Adoptee Awareness**

You 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* (2002), p. 547

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 (Diemer, 2020). Research examining consciousness development amongst 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 amongst 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

Branco, S.F., Kim, J., Newton, G., Cooper-Lewter, S.K., and O'Loughlin, P. (2022).

community, an under-examined and marginalized group. We also discuss implications for adoptees. 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.

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 as a way to reduce negative associations about adoption yet are themselves adoption microfictions (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 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 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 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 7-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, and 7) Acting out the vision - forgiveness and activism. Anzaldúa's consciousness process emphasized tolerating ambiguity as one straddles 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*

(1979), the awakening metaphor morphed into “out of the fog” language, possibly referencing Lifton’s belief that adoption is often enshrouded in a “veil” of opaque silence and secrecy (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 bloggers and social media influencers and exemplifies the type of generative-themed language per Freire (1970) 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) expands upon the “out of the fog” terminology further by enfolded in 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, and 6) reculturation. Baden et al. (2012) emphasized 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. Penny et al.’s (2007) reconstruction model 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 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.



**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.

Susan Branco (she/her/ella) is an Assistant Professor in Counselor Education and transnational Colombian adoptee. She graduated from a master's program in rehabilitation counseling in 1997 and provided clinical counseling services to marginalized populations in community mental health. Through this work she observed the disproportionate number of clients who were adopted either transnationally, transracially, or through the US foster care system, and sought additional training in couple and family counseling. The advanced clinical training, paired with her own racial, ethnic, and adoptee identity development and consciousness process, to include connecting with the Colombian adoptee community, led to a career shift in the early 2000s to work with members of the adoption kinship network. After a brief time as a token adoptee in a post adoption service agency, she launched an independent practice. Eventually, she pursued her doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision, after observing how the credibility of a PhD can advance adoptee voices via transformative scholarship.

JaeRan Kim (she/her) currently works as an Associate Professor in Social Work. Her social work practice and academic career were inspired by her personal experience as a Korean adoptee and experiencing her own adoptee consciousness process in 1999 after learning about the larger Korean adoptee communities in the US and Europe. Working in both public and private adoptions as a social worker, and subsequent efforts to understand the many factors and

mechanisms that facilitated the placement of a Korean child to a white family in the U.S., led JaeRan to research aspects of the adoptee experience that are missing. She began blogging in 2006 as a way to elevate adult adoptee voices and challenge the dominant narratives on adoption that were focused on adoptive parents and children.

Grace Newton (she/her) is a public adoptions social worker who does direct practice with foster youth, foster families, and waiting families hoping to adopt from the public child welfare system. She has served in multiple roles related to adoption, including child welfare research fellow, support group facilitator, one-on-one mentor, and blogger. Grace joined the field of social work after coming into consciousness around her adoptee identity while in her undergraduate studies. After seeking Asian American and adoptee communities online and in-person, her drive to uplift and expand knowledge about the adoptee community developed and continues today. Her status as a Chinese transracial adoptee drives her passion and authenticity in her personal, professional, and academic work related to adoption.

Stephanie Kripa Cooper-Lewter, Ph.D. (she/her) works in philanthropy. Her transnational immigration from India and adoption as a toddler profoundly impacted her life trajectory. At age 10, she became a naturalized citizen of the United States of America. Because of her adoption journey, she decided to become a social worker to impact children and families specifically within the child welfare system, particularly those of color. Her direct practice experience includes working with youth aging out of foster care, Indian Child Welfare, school and hospital social work, before moving into executive leadership roles. Becoming a mother at age 20 prompted further understanding of her adoption consciousness. Since her 20's, she has explored her identity as an Indian American woman within the South Asian diaspora and its intersections with race, ethnicity, culture and heritage while raising multi-heritage children. She has worked

with many Indian and other international adoptees over the past three decades. Her Ph.D. dissertation focused on the identity journeys and life stories of women adopted transnationally.

Paula O’Loughlin (she/her) is a Korean transracial adoptee who is also a parent to a son adopted from Korea and is continuously expanding her own consciousness and understanding of the many complex identities she holds. In her early thirties, Paula discovered and connected with other transracial adoptees; this transformational period in her life equipped her with the language and provided the necessary psychological and emotional safety for her to explore and fully process her feelings, thoughts, and experiences as an adoptee of color. Paula is indebted to the adoptee sisterhood she has found throughout this process; their unconditional love and support has empowered Paula to step into her courage and purpose with humility, vulnerability, and a sense of wholeness she would have not otherwise known. Paula has spent almost two decades working in the K-12 public education system in various roles, including teaching middle and high school students and serving on her home school district’s board of education.

### **Adoptee consciousness model**

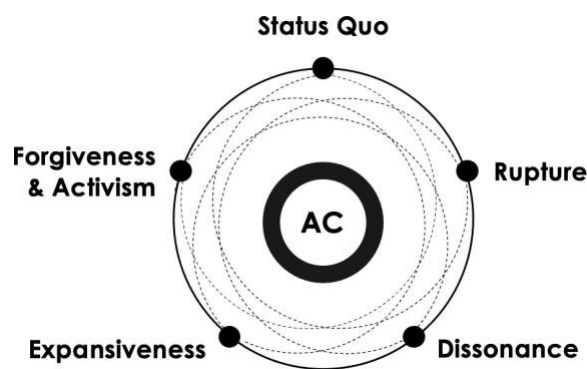
Our conceptualization of a process of adoptee consciousness is best thought of as a spiral in which touchstones or turning points propel the adoptee to a different aspect of consciousness, rather than a linear set of stages with a “final” or desired outcome. We patterned our model after Anzaldúa’s process 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 below 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*



**Table 1**

*Adoptee consciousness process definitions*

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 see 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	The adoptee may shut down and reject evidence or may decide to dive

	<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Dissonance (Nepantla and coatlicue)</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Expansiveness (El Compromiso, coyolxauhqui)</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
<p>Forgiveness &amp; Activism</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>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</p>

legislation, post adoption services,  
etc.)

---

*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” to 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 dominant 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' pre-adoption experiences; adoptees who believe in the status quo narrative agree with the belief that adoptees are a blank slate or *tabula rasa* and argue 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 (arrebato)***

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 re-think what they know about who they are and/or others who upheld the dominant narrative/status quo. The initial seismic shifts are followed by aftershocks, like 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 that 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 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. 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 children for adoption but refuse to believe their own first/birth parent was coerced. Or an adoptee acknowledges adoption involves loss but thinks 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 to articulate their positions as they are still trying to understand where 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 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. 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 the both/and related to adoption and learning to tolerate the discomfort 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 podcasts, 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, many 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 that are 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, 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, Implication, 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 adoptees' 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, to include adoptees,

adoptive families, and mental health and adoption professionals, 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 states. We encourage them to seek out support via individual adoption-informed mental health providers and other adoptee support networks to normalize and validate the consciousness process.
- Adoptees in the critical consciousness process may also share insights and ideas publicly 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. For example, please see the “suggested citation” for how to cite this work at the end of the paper.

### **Adoptive Families**

- Adoptive family members may experience guilt, shame, rejection, confusion, anger (at the adoptee or adoption system), in response to witnessing the adoptee consciousness process. Rather than project onto the adoptee, families may seek out their own support

(i.e., professional adoption-informed mental health services, other adoptive family support groups, webinars on adoption awareness, etc.)

- Adoptive families must also tolerate ambiguity and hold space for the adoptee to process without any judgment or attempts to “fix” whatever emotions or feelings they are expressing.
- Adoptive families should be familiar with ambiguous loss frameworks (Boss, 1999) which advocates for sitting in ambiguity, complexity, and learning to “live well with ambiguity” as well as tolerate distress (Linahan & Wilkes, 2018).
- Adoptive parents may find themselves in a parallel process of adoptive parent consciousness about adoption. We encourage adoptive parents to seek out like-minded adoptive parents on a similar journey of consciousness for support.

### **Mental Health and Adoption Professionals**

- Adoption professionals should have an understanding of ambiguous loss frameworks (see above). The ambiguous loss framework not only supports the adoptee but also encourages family members, significant others, adoption professionals, and mental health counselors to tolerate the ambiguity as well in solidarity with the adoptee.
- Those providing counseling and other services should seek to become adoption-informed practitioners. Likewise, they should not pathologize adoptees during the consciousness process, nor gaslight them, and avoid adoptee microaggressions (Baden, 2016).
- Similarly, adoption providers may also experience implicit guilt, defensiveness, or feel threatened in response to adoptee consciousness. Rather than avoid, dismiss, or denigrate adoptee voices we encourage responsible allyship with adoptees to review policies and systems for opportunities for structural changes.

### **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 Pillen et al.'s (2020) generalized model. 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" and into awareness of structural and systemic oppressive systems embedded in adoption practice. 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.

### References

- Anzaldúa, G., & Keating, A. (Eds.). (2013). *This bridge we call home: Radical visions for transformation*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203952962>
- Baden, A. L. (2016). "Do you know your *real* parents?" and other adoption microaggression. *Adoption Quarterly*, 19,(1), 1-25. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2015.1026012>
- Baden, A.L., Treweeke, L. M., & Alhuwalia, K.M. (2012). Reclaiming culture: Reculturation of transracial international adoptees. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 90, 387-399.doi.<https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2012.00049.x>
- Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*. Cambridge University Press.
- Branco, S. F. (2021). The Colombian adoption house: A case study. *Adoption Quarterly*. 24(1), 25-47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2020.1834042>
- Bruce, G. (2021, April 27). Finding my way out of the adoption fog – Guest Post by Gilli Bruce. How to be Adopted. <https://howtobeadopted.com/home/2021/finding-my-way-out-of-the-adoption-fog-guest-post-by-gilli-bruce>
- Buterbaugh, K. (2013). Whitewashing Adoption: A Critique of 'Respectful Adoption Language'. Available at SSRN 2195774. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2195774>
- Carp, E. W. (2004). *Adoption politics: Bastard nation and ballot initiative 58*. University Press of Kansas.
- Carp, E. W. (2014). *Jean Paton and the struggle to reform American adoption*. University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.6242018>
- Branco, S.F., Kim, J., Newton, G., Cooper-Lewter, S.K., and O'Loughlin, P. (2022).

- Diemer, M. A. (2020). Pushing the envelope: The who, what, when, and why of critical consciousness. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 70*, 1- 4.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101192>
- Diemer, M. A., Pinedo, A., Bañales, J., Mathews, C. J., Frisby, M. B., Harris, E. M., & McAlister, S. (2021). Recentering action in critical consciousness. *Child Development Perspectives, 15*(1), 12-17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12393>
- Diemer, M. A., & Rapa, L. J. (2016). Unraveling the complexity of critical consciousness, political efficacy, and political action among marginalized adolescents. *Child Development, 87*(1), 221–238. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12446>
- Diemer, M. A., Rapa, L. J., Voight, A. M., & McWhirter, E. H. (2016). Critical consciousness: A developmental approach to addressing marginalization and oppression. *Child Development Perspectives, 10*(4), 216-221. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12193>
- Evans, M. E. (2016, October 11). Adult adoptees speaking ‘Out of the Fog’. Light of Day Stories. <https://lightofdaystories.com/2016/10/>
- Foley, G. (2021). Revisiting Freire. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 61*(3), 376-397.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Herman, E. (2009). Kinship by design. In *Kinship by Design*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lee, A. T., & Haskins, N. H. (2022). Toward a culturally humble practice: Critical consciousness as an antecedent. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 100*, 104–112.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12403>
- Lee, R. M. (2003). The transracial adoption paradox: History, research, and counseling implications of cultural socialization. *The counseling psychologist, 31*(6), 711-744.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000003258087>
- Branco, S.F., Kim, J., Newton, G., Cooper-Lewter, S.K., and O’Loughlin, P. (2022).



- Lifton, B. J. (2009). *Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). The University of Michigan Press.
- Linehan, M. M., & Wilks, C. R. (2018). The course and evolution of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. *The American Journal of Psychotherapy*, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2015.69.2.97>
- Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 3(5), 551. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0023281>
- Mosley, D. V., Hargons, C. N., Meiller, C., Angyal, B., Wheeler, P., Davis, C., & Sevens-Watkins, D. (2020). Critical Consciousness of anti-Black racism: A practical model to prevent and resist racial trauma. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 68(1), 1-6. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cou0000430>
- Myers, K. (2014). Rethinking 'Positive' Adoption Language and Reclaiming Stigmatized Identities. *Gazillion Voices*, 1-10.
- Newton, G. (2022). The trauma and healing of consciousness. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105563>
- Penny, J., Borders, L. D., & Portnoy, F. (2007). Reconstruction of adoption issues: Delineation of five phases among adult adoptees. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 85(1), 30-41. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2007.tb00441.x>
- Pittman, L. (2020, October 30). Randall-A study in coming out of the fog. Adoption-My Truth-A-Fill-in-the-Blanks-Life <https://adoptionmytruth.com/2020/10/30/randall-a-study-in-coming-out-of-the-fog/>
- Thibeault, D., & Spencer, M. S. (2019). The Indian Adoption Project and the profession of social work. *Social Service Review*, 93(4), 804-832. <https://doi.org/10.1086/706771>
- Branco, S.F., Kim, J., Newton, G., Cooper-Lewter, S.K., and O'Loughlin, P. (2022).

Watkins, D. (2020). Critical Consciousness of anti-Black racism: A practical model to prevent and resist racial trauma. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 68(1), 1-6.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cou0000430>

Torres Rivera, E. (2020). Concepts of Liberation Psychology. In L. Comas-Díaz & E. Torres Rivera (Eds.), *Liberation Psychology: Theory, Method, Practice, and Social Justice*. (pp. 41-52). American Psychological Association.

Tucker, A. [@angieadoptee]. (2020, November 13). *The Adopted Life*. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CHjESSRMzUm/?hl=en>

Uriostegui, M., Roy, A. L., & Pajunar Li-Grining, C. (2021). What drives you? Black and Latinx youths' critical consciousness, motivations, and academic careers and activities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 50, 58-74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-020-01343-6>

### **Recommended citation**

Branco, S.F., Kim, J., Newton, G., Cooper-Lewter, S.K., and O'Loughlin, P. (2022). Out of the fog and into consciousness: A model of adoptee awareness. Self-published manuscript.

