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Be Grateful or Be Quiet: Confronting the Epistemic Harms of Adoptism¹

Michele Merritt

Abstract

In this paper, I introduce a new term, *adoptism*, to characterize the unique form(s) of marginalization to which adopted persons are subjected. Adoptism shows up primarily as enforced gratitude, and this injunction to be grateful carries with it epistemic harms that have heretofore been overlooked because the dominant social narrative surrounding adoption is that it is an overwhelmingly positive practice. This dominant view stems largely from adoptive parents and the adoption industry, which is an institution, I argue, that is far from child-centered and beneficent. Because those most impacted by being adopted, *adopted persons*, are conspicuously absent in discussions of adoption, there is a great potential for epistemic injustice. These injustices are magnified when adoptees attempt to provide testimony that challenges the prevailing social script surrounding adoption. Using my lived experience as a domestic adoptee, as well as the testimony of many other adopted persons, I uncover and examine the ways adoptees are harmed in our capacities as knowers. Finally, after dispelling the myths that adoptist ideology upholds, I suggest ways to redress the otherwise hidden injustices of adoption.

Keywords: adoption, epistemic injustice, hermeneutical marginalization, kinship, feminist epistemology

1. Introduction

The central aims of this paper are to examine the ways adopted people are marginalized by the institution of adoption and to suggest ways we might redress these harms. After briefly detailing what I mean by the “institution” of adoption, I

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions in developing this paper, as well as Dr. Elizabeth Victor, who has stuck with me on this project, helping me rework these arguments, for over three years and through many rejections at many journals. Finally, to all the adoptees whose testimony has inspired this project and whose voices I aim to amplify, I hope this paper is a small step in that direction.

provide my own testimony as an adult adoptee² along with other adoptee testimony and research that challenges the dominant narrative of adoption as a “win-win.” This, taken together with feminist scholarship on epistemic injustice, will serve to demonstrate how the institution of adoption routinely subjugates adopted persons. Adoptees, like other marginalized persons, are consistently silenced or coerced into self-silencing when they attempt to provide testimony. One reason for this, I argue, is that the prevailing narrative surrounding adoption views it as a humanitarian practice that gives children “better lives” by “rescuing” them (Joyce 2013). Adoptive parents, in turn, are often viewed as selfless saviors who provide the safe and secure homes these children so desperately need. This dominant script regarding adoption serves to paper over adoptee marginalization, precisely because adoptee disenfranchisement simply does not show up in this framework, and in fact, quite the opposite assumption is typically made—namely, that we are all “lucky” to be adopted. I examine how this external narrative of being lucky or chosen is internalized by adoptees and constitutes a doubly disenfranchising aspect of adoptee experience. When adoptees provide testimony, if our stories run counter to the prevailing view, we are routinely “unheard” (Dotson 2011). We are rendered incapable of speaking because our life narrative has already been written for us; hence, we are excluded from the pooling of knowledge surrounding adoption, despite having an insider or “emic” perspective on being adopted (Bergman and Lindgren 2018). Adoptees are also “throttled,” a term Michael Calder (2021) uses to describe purposeful truncating on the part of one speaker holding power over another. I argue that when adoptees are subjected to this throttling, it affects our capacity for self-knowledge and self-determination. Adoptees are further disenfranchised if we do not express gratitude, ironically, for the conditions that marginalized and disenfranchised us in the first place.

This secondary disenfranchisement—the *injunction to gratitude*—further bolsters the ideology of the adoptive parent (henceforth AP) as a savior/rescuer, thereby obscuring the ways APs might actually contribute to adoptee disenfranchisement. I introduce the term *adoptism* to characterize the specific type of discrimination adoptees face. Taking cues from Baril’s (2023) usage of the term *suicidism*, a particular form of discrimination against suicidal people, I claim that while adoptee disenfranchisement intersects with many oppressive and discriminatory practices, there are unique ways adoptees are marginalized, and hence, we need a new framework through which to theorize it. Adoptism is the prevailing view that adoption is a social good, one for which adoptees ought to be grateful, and hence, those of us who do not perform gratitude are pathologized, infantilized, and dismissed—often by our own adoptive parents. Thus, a final argument I make in the

² I use “adoptee” to refer to myself as an adopted person, recognizing this is not the preferred appellation for all adopted/displaced persons.

paper is that if we wish to empower adoptees with epistemic agency and undo adoptist ideology, adoptees must be centered in all discussions of adoption rather than kept on the sidelines. This in turn means *decentering* AP voices. In every other intersectional feminist movement, we have seen this shift: to listening first and foremost to those marginalized by an oppressive system while refusing to let those who benefit most from those oppressive systems control the narrative. We must do the same within adoption discourse, lest we continue disenfranchising adoptees and subjecting them to the injustices specific to adoptism.

2. Situating Adoptees within the Institution of Adoption

Adoption connotes a wide variety of practices and meanings. Kinship adoption, for example, where a biological relative assumes guardianship over a child, is often informal, can be temporary, and does not always involve legal proceedings. Stepparent adoption likewise involves continued contact with at least part of the child's genetic family, and many times, it includes the child's consent. I will not be addressing these types of adoption in what follows. Instead, I am focusing on what is sometimes referred to as *plenary* or *subtractive* adoption (Yngvesson 2004; Howell 2009), a process that permanently and irrevocably dissolves a child's legal ties to their genetic family. Plenary adoption includes both open and closed adoptions, as well as domestic and international. Even in so-called "open" adoptions, where there is some degree of contact maintained with the birth family, the child's birth certificate is altered to reflect a pseudo-fact of birth—namely, that the adoptive parents are the progenitors of the child. The child's name is changed to match that of the adoptive family, and the birth parents' rights to any form of parenting of the child are permanently revoked. When talking about adoption in the United States, plenary adoption is common in agency- and government-mediated adoption. I will henceforth be using "adoption" as shorthand for the plenary type.

Situating adoptees within the institution of *plenary* adoption, therefore, means they are children whose relationships with their kin are far more mediated by other institutions that intersect with adoption, such as the legal system. Because plenary adoption necessarily involves a legal transfer of parental rights, this already situates it among at least one larger institution—the law. The legal system, in turn, intersects with all sorts of other institutions, many with dubious morality (Inman 2021; Clemons 2014). Plenary adoption almost always involves a transfer of money—for example, to obtain parental rights over a child—whereas in parenting that follows the birth of one's gestational child, no such legal transfer is made. It is assumed. Most importantly, for adoption to even be viewed as a form of parenting, first and foremost a *deparenting* must occur. A family must be legally severed, irrevocably. It is also

worth noting that adopted children can be “returned,”³ whereas adoptees are not permitted, no matter how old they are, to annul their adoptions. All of this sets the stage for adoptees to feel displaced and commodified, as Lina Vanegas, MSW, often notes on her Instagram and Twitter pages.⁴ Furthermore, what I’ve noted about the differences in kinship creation via adoption has implications for how adoptive parenting is viewed as well.

The narrative surrounding plenary adoption is that it is a solution to two social problems: the shame of infertility, and the birth of a baby to young, unmarried, or otherwise unprepared parents (Quartly, Swain, and Cuthbert 2013; Baden 2016; Nelson 2020). It is a win-win, therefore, for hopeful adoptive parents and birth parents alike, but it is also assumed to be a “win” for the adoptee, who is provided a new identity through a clean and permanent break from their original kin. As Kathryn Joyce (2013) details in *The Child Catchers*, adoption is commonly seen as a story of “rescue,” especially in the case of intercountry adoptions and among evangelical Christian groups (Cuthbert, Spark, and Murphy 2010). Not only is adoption the antidote to unwanted pregnancies and infertility, but it is also a means by which children can be moved from poor parts of the world to more affluent ones—again, all in the service of providing them a “better life.” One need only peruse websites of some of the leading adoption agencies such as Gladney or American Adoptions to see that adoption is lauded in these ways. Those who adopt are *saving* children in need, and they are making a “lifelong commitment” to offering a “loving, stable family for a child to grow up in” (Benointon 2014). All of this serves to paint adoptive parents as selfless saviors and adoptees as those who ought to be thankful they were gifted better parents. In this way, it is easy to see how difficult it might be for an adopted person to even begin to criticize their adoptive parents or plenary adoption more generally.

³ Sometimes referred to as “failed adoptions,” the Myka Stauffer adoption and subsequent “rehoming” being a high-profile case. (See Stephanie McNeal, “A YouTuber Placed Her Adopted Autistic Son from China with a New Family—After Making Content with Him for Years,” *BuzzFeed News*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/stephaniemcneal/myka-stauffer-huxley-announcement>.) There are entire markets online for “second chance adoptions,” such as the “Second Chance Adoptions” Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/secondchanceadoptions>.

⁴ Vanegas’s Twitter profile is at <https://x.com/LinaLeadsWLove>; her Instagram page is <https://www.instagram.com/linaleadswithlove/?hl=en>. See also a recent online article of hers: “Organizing and Activism of Adopted and Displaced People,” Bill of Health (blog), May 13, 2022, <https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2022/05/13/organizing-and-activism-of-adopted-and-displaced-people/>.

Recognizing that all parents, adoptive or otherwise, are subject to scrutiny over their intentions in becoming parents, I do not wish to delve into whether adoptive parents are somehow more or less altruistic, as this is beside any point I am making in this paper. What I am interested in showing, instead, is the way the mythos surrounding adoption-as-rescue and adoptive-parent-as-savior conceals the problematic nature of plenary adoption and therefore disenfranchises adoptees. By setting up adoptive parents as selfless child rescuers, the overriding script of adoption serves to place an expectation of gratitude upon adoptees, thereby foreclosing the possibility that they might have any substantive critique of the system that created them. Besides all the inequities listed above, we are routinely silenced when we provide testimony that does not reinforce the positive social narrative of adoption. In the next section, I provide evidence for this claim. Drawing on my own experience as an adopted person, along with feminist epistemology, I will show that adoptees constitute a marginalized group heretofore overlooked as such because the institution assumed to provide us with a “better life” instead subjugates us and dismisses our testimony if it does not align with adoption-positive rhetoric. I argue that this constitutes a specific form of discrimination against adoptees.

3. Being Adopted, Being Disenfranchised

I begin with my own testimony and lived experiences of being an adopted person who challenges the typical assumptions about adoption, and I will cite other instances of what I consider to be adoptee disenfranchisement. Then, I will frame this disenfranchisement in terms of epistemic injustice, which can be preliminarily and generally understood as being harmed specifically in one’s capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007). This will allow me to show why adopted persons constitute a marginalized group, one marked by being devalued and dismissed, ironically, when providing testimony about what it’s like to be adopted. It is worth noting that nothing I say in what follows is intended to be a universal claim about adoptee experience. We are far too heterogeneous for any such account to apply. When it comes to systemic issues adoptees as a group face, however, I do argue that my account applies generally, even if, at the individual level, we experience these injustices in different ways or perhaps not at all.

My adoption occurred in a state where even today, my records remain sealed, so I am unable to obtain an unamended birth certificate, identifying information about my genetic family, or the foster family I spent six weeks with before being permanently adopted. I was always terrified to bring up the topic of meeting my birth family because I thought it would hurt my AP’s feelings. There was so much emphasis placed on how special and how wanted I was, and I grew up being told that “real” parents are the ones who raise you. My “adopted birthday”—the day papers were signed permanently and irreversibly ending all legal ties to my genetic family—was

celebrated like a whole other birthday, complete with presents and cake. For the most part, I spent my childhood and early adulthood under a sort of spell, believing that I really was lucky and that it would be hurtful to my APs to refer to my genetic family as family at all. This changed when I began having children and seeing other humans who I was genetically related to for the first time in my life. It was like dominoes after that. Begetting my own genetic kin gave birth to more questions about myself, which led to interrogating my story more closely, which then led to questioning adoption generally. I began meeting other adoptees, something I had not experienced before, except for the adopted sibling with whom I had grown up. Suddenly, I was surrounded by other adopted people who did not express hurt or anger when I spoke negatively about adoption. Instead, they shared those emotions, thereby validating my own.

This brief story about my awakening to the problems inherent in adoption lends *emic credibility* to what I am arguing in this paper. An emic perspective is one that comes from someone living within the culture or condition being described, and hence many anthropologists have argued it is crucial to understanding how marginalization is experienced and how it functions within institutions. Furthermore, my story is far from an outlier. A quick scan of #adopteetwitter, Adoptee TikTok, or #adopteevoices on Instagram will reveal just how typical my narrative is. Some accounts with large followings that speak similarly are @llmunro, @annatoccara, and @highnessophelia on Twitter; blackinwhitefamily, fereraswan, changingadoption, and mythsmisgivings on Instagram; and karpoozy on TikTok. A tweet by Lisa Munro (2023), for example, says, “Anyways, The Girls Who Went Away was the first time I'd read something other than happy stories about adoption and sent me down a rabbit hole of trying to understand how we keep getting it so wrong.” Likewise, there exists a whole set of narrative conventions and terminology within “adoptionland,” all of which were there before I entered the space. What I went through is often referred to as “coming out of the fog,” where “fog” stands for “fear, obligation, and guilt” (Forward 2019). The fear, obligation, and guilt that I and other adoptees often experience when, say, entering into reunion with our biological families underscores the way adoptees are in an inferior position within a power dynamic and, hence, at risk for marginalization and oppression.

My experiences also highlight how difficult it was for me to even recognize these emotions in myself because I had effectively been robbed of the tools to fully explore my story and, hence, my identity as a person. I was never told that adoption can also be sad and painful and that adoptees as a group suffer from mental health issues far more than nonadopted persons (see, e.g., Melero and Sánchez-Sandoval 2017; Baden and Wiley 2007; Yoon et al. 2012; Campo-Arias, Egurrola-Pedraza, and Herazo 2020). In fact, when I did struggle with my mental health growing up, I was put in therapy, and never once did a therapist explore with me how being relinquished as an infant might have impacted me. The narrative forced on me from the beginning

of my life was that I was loved so much that I was given away and that I was lucky. Any grief or sadness must be the result of something else because adoption clearly *saved* me from a life of pain. My birth mother was selfless for giving me away to strangers. So, it would have been selfish of her to try to parent me because she would have robbed my APs of the chance. It was not until the birth of my first child that I began unraveling those messages and deconstructing how they affected me. The first few weeks with my newborn were spent in a panic, sure that I was incapable of parenting, suicidal, because I was convinced my child would be better off without me. It was then I started reaching out to other adopted people and finding I was not alone in these feelings, and like many of them, I was finally reckoning with the loss of my family—a loss I had theretofore been prohibited from grieving.

Meeting other adoptees also underscored how common it was to feel unheard and unseen when discussing negative feelings about being adopted. Witnessing other adopted people attempt to speak out about these issues online, I have noticed some thematic rejoinders. We are often told, in response to pointing out the harms of adoption, that we ought to be grateful rather than being so “bitter” or “angry.” One blogger, “Severed Origins,” was told to “show some respect and gratitude” to his family on a Facebook post where he stated that “adopting a child into your family does not mean that they will view your family as theirs.” The commenter went on to say that once Severed Origins turned eighteen, he could determine for himself how to relate to his parents.⁵ Here, we see not only tone policing and coerced gratitude, but infantilization. Severed Origins is in his thirties, as he has disclosed several times publicly, but as many adoptees will testify, it is as if we are perpetual children in the eyes of society.

Perhaps the most common reply to any adoptee offering criticism of adoption is “You are so angry” or “Don’t you think you will hurt your parent’s feelings by talking about them like this?” A highly visible case of tone-policing and invalidating comments such as these can be seen in the recent trending of the hashtag “#ungratefulPOS” in reference to Colin Kaepernick testifying about how adoption has racist underpinnings and that even though his adoptive parents loved and cared for him, they were not immune from racial microaggressions toward him.⁶

⁵ See Severed Origins, “Your adopted child is not obligated to view your family as theirs,” Facebook, November 1, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=195711201997846&id=101421044760196&mibextid=WC7FNe&rdid=mE1vRVNgKRjq4vrM. Note that the original commenter deleted their comments, but other commenters shared screenshots of the posts.

⁶ See, e.g., Andre Castillo, “‘Pathological Liar’—NFL Fans Blast Colin Kaepernick for Throwing his Adoptive Parents under the Bus,” Sportskeeda, April 3, 2023,

Tone-policing is commonly experienced by marginalized groups (Davis and Ernst 2019). Those attempting to speak out about ways they are harmed by institutions are often told they are being too aggressive, angry, or sensitive (see, e.g., Collins 2022; Lorde 1997). Adoptees who speak out about the harms of adoption are often told we ought to “seek help” if we express anger, no matter how justified that emotion is. One of the most insidious way adoptees are dismissed is when we are asked, “Would you rather have been aborted?” in response to any adoption-critical discourse. The sad reality is that many adoptees answer yes to this deflective question, without qualification. Moreover, the question entirely misses the point: that adoption and abortion are two separate issues. As work by Gretchen Sisson and others demonstrates, 91 percent of women who were denied or refused abortions went on to parent their children and never once considered adoption (Sisson et al. 2017, 141–42; see also Sisson 2024). Adoption is an alternative to parenting, not pregnancy, and as such, suggesting to an adoptee that they be grateful they were not aborted is a category error (see, e.g., Merritt 2022a; Drenka 2019).

Another way to assess the extent to which adoptees critical of adoption are permitted to speak on the issue is by examining academic outlets on the topic. The first thing to note regarding adoption scholarship is that it is conspicuously lacking in adoptee voices while being disproportionately full of AP-authored work. Though I have not located a corpus analysis and do not have exact numbers, inspecting journals on my own supports this claim. I randomly selected March 2020 issues of two major adoption journals, *Adoption and Fostering* and *Adoption and Culture*, and found that in the former, adoptee-authored work accounted for 8 percent of the issue (only one article of twelve) and in the latter, it accounted for 33.3 percent of the issue. The rest of the articles were AP-authored (50 percent or more) or written by facilitators, caseworkers, or birth parents. It is worth noting that *Adoption and Culture's* chief editor is an adoptee, which might explain the slightly better adoptee representation.

In philosophy, adoption is a fairly uncommon topic, and adoptee-authored work is nearly nonexistent. The edited volume *Adoption Matters*, by Haslanger and Witt (2005), for example, features two essays by adoptees, out of eleven, and a small reflection by Harry Frankfurt who is also adopted, though his piece is not specifically about adoption. The chapters in this book by adoptees are not critical of adoption, and they even suggest that some of the bioethical concerns regarding genetic information being withheld from adoptees is a sort of neurosis manufactured by bio-essentialist discourse (see, e.g., Leighton 2005).

So, there exists adoptee-authored scholarship, but it's rare compared to AP-authored work. Of course, an objection here is that not all authors disclose their

<https://www.sportskeeda.com/nfl/nfl-fans-blast-colin-kaepernick-throwing-adoptive-parents-bus>.

relationship to adoption, so perhaps there are more adoptee-authored works than it seems at first glance. This might be so, and it would be hard to track. One thing less difficult to track however is the amount of adoptee-authored critical commentary about adoption as a larger institution. It is exceedingly rare to find such scholarship in academia. Many reasons could explain this lacuna. It might be simply that not all adoptees are compelled to write about adoption. Likewise, given that adoptees make up a small percentage of the US population (Children’s Bureau 2020), their representation in academia is likely even smaller, so the relative absence of adoptee-authored scholarship might just align with the paucity of adoptees working in these related fields.⁷ I find these explanations unsatisfactory, however, given the abundance of adoptee memoirs published, many of which present far from glowing reviews of being adopted. Add to this the fact that organizations such as *Bastard Nation* have been around for decades fighting for adoptee rights, as well as the growing trend of adoptee voices on social media sites like TikTok and Twitter, and it seems like the absence of such positions in academia—especially in feminist philosophy—does not match the lived experiences of many adoptees.⁸

In terms of my own attempts to publish adoption-critical commentary, I have received more desk rejections than any other editorial decision, and reviewer responses claiming my tone is too angry or aggressive, or that there is no evidence to support my arguments regarding the ways adoption can have deleterious effects on adoptees, despite citing an overabundance of sources indicating this is true. I have

⁷ According to the Adoption History Project (<https://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/topics/adoptionstatistics.htm>), “Approximately 5 million Americans alive today are adoptees, 2–4 percent of all families have adopted, and 2.5 percent of all children under 18 are adopted.” The Adoption History Project does not make it clear what “adoptee” refers to (plenary, stepparent, grandparent, etc.) so depending on one’s interpretation, that number could be too high if we mean to only include adoptees of plenary adoption. The Adoption Council has quite different data (<https://adoptioncouncil.org/article/adoption-statistics/>), but I hesitate to include pro-adoption funded research as the numbers are often skewed (see Joyce 2013).

⁸ See these recent news articles highlighting adoptee activism: Vanessa Taylor, “Conservatives Love to Paint Adoption as the Solution to Abortion. Adoptees Aren’t Buying It,” *Mic*, June 21, 2022, updated February 20, 2024, <https://www.mic.com/impact/roe-adoption-abortion-conservatives>; Kimmy Yam, “Adoptees Who Publicly Support Roe Targeted by Anti-Abortion Activists: ‘What If You Were Aborted?’,” NBC News, July 10, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/adoptees-publicly-support-roe-targeted-anti-abortion-activists-aborted-rcna37101>; Tik Root, “The Baby Brokers: Inside America’s Murky Private-Adoption Industry,” *Time*, June 3, 2021, <https://time.com/6051811/private-adoption-america/>.

also received the all too common “I know an adopted person who is happy being adopted” in reviewer comments. In short, responses I have received from reviewers echo the general social attitude about adoption as a positive thing and reflect the way adoptees are silenced in public discourse as I described above.

Another example of dismissing adoptee testimony worth mentioning is when we are told to just do genetic testing and quit whining, as if this would solve all the systemic issues surrounding plenary adoption. Reactions such as this fail to recognize that adoptees are often forced to pay for information about themselves that should have been given to them all along. Knowing one’s genetic progenitors, if not a *right*, is almost certainly a “significant interest” that ought to be made accessible to adoptees. Daniel Groll (2021) makes a similar argument regarding donor-conceived persons—namely, that it is unethical to knowingly make this information difficult or impossible to obtain. Nevertheless, in many adoption and donor-conceived scenarios, gatekeeping genetic information is the norm. When I began searching for my genetic family, the adoption agency that had already profited from my adoption told me it would cost one thousand dollars just to initiate a search. If I request my original, unamended birth certificate that is sealed away in the state of Florida, I am told I am not legally permitted to see it. This is just one example of how the institution of adoption is exploitative and steeped in profit-driven ideology (Gerow 2002).

Returning to the representation issue, what might be reasons for this noticeable absence of adoptee voices in academia, and why are adoptees who speak out about adoption met with such dismissive defensiveness? In the following section, I contend that thinking about potential answers to these questions will reveal the ways adoptees constitute a marginalized group that has heretofore been overlooked as such. Not only are we routinely undervalued in our capacity to provide legitimate testimony about our own lived experiences, but the responses to such testimony demonstrate a further disenfranchisement—namely, an *injunction to gratitude*. Thus, adoptees are doubly disenfranchised because when discussing how we are harmed by adoption, we are both devalued as knowers and subjected to enforced gratitude for the same system we are critiquing as harmful. All of these marginalizing and oppressive factors constitute what I term *adoptism*, which is a specific form of discrimination adopted people face, one that is easily concealed because of the doubly disenfranchising elements at play. Adoption is at once viewed as an unequivocal good, something we might even have a moral obligation to do (see, e.g., Rulli 2016; Friedrich 2013), or something we should prefer over biological procreating because of environmental concerns (Morris 2015). Adopted parents, on the other hand, often lament being discriminated against because they do not live up to bionormative standards of the “ideal family” (Haslanger 2009). Hanging in the balance are the adoptees themselves, who are rarely consulted about any of it and instead assumed to be living the “better life” afforded to them by the same institution that

simultaneously undermines their credibility as knowers. Thus, I will argue that adoptism at once causes and sustains adoptee marginalization. By dictating that gratitude is the only acceptable affective response to being adopted, adoptism creates the ideal conditions for dismissing adoptees who do not live up to this expectation as uncredible and even pathological.⁹

4. Epistemic Injustice and Adoptee Disenfranchisement: Defining *Adoptism*

Fricker's (2007, 20) work provides a starting point for thinking about the ways a person can be harmed "specifically in her capacity as a knower." However, we see similar arguments made by women of color much earlier, notably in Collins's (2022) work, where she shows how Black women are undervalued as knowers in white supremacist culture. What follows is a cursory overview of a wide-reaching literature, one not intending to privilege a singular standpoint. I focus on Fricker here because of the way she differentiates between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, the latter being "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker 2007, 155).

Fricker's account tracks how people are prejudicially excluded from the practice of assembling knowledge—that is, producing knowledge that becomes part of the general "pool" from which everyone draws. This exclusion can happen at individual and systemic levels. At the individual level, a person who already has negative stereotypes associated with their identity will be more susceptible to what Fricker refers to as *testimonial injustice*. If a Black woman is already seen by another interlocutor as aggressive or less intelligent, then her credibility as a knower will be deflated. She will not be taken seriously. Her testimony will not carry the same evidentiary weight as, say, a white woman's and probably even less than a white man's. *Hermeneutical injustice*, on the other hand, is based on structural identity biases that exist within communal knowledge resources. There are overlaps between these two forms of injustice, and I will say more about hermeneutical injustice later in the paper as it pertains to adoptees as a group; for now, let's think about how adoptees might be harmed individually when they attempt to contribute to the knowledge pool regarding adoption.

Testimonial injustice occurs most often when adoptees speak about adoption in a negative way. Adoptees are viewed with less credibility than APs, who are seen as authorities in much the same way parents, not their children, are seen as

⁹ I have recently learned that the term *affective injustice* might apply here just as well as, if not better than, epistemic injustice. I plan to write something about this in the future, but as this came to my attention just at the end of publication of this piece, I did not have time or space to include a discussion of it.

authorities on parenting. As noted above, the age of the adoptee doesn't matter. Even adoptees who are older than their AP audience often say they feel they are being talked to like a child. Another common dismissive tactic is to be told to "get help" or that we need therapy, simply for sharing how adoption has caused harm in our lives. Kate Abramson's (2014) work on gaslighting is applicable here because not only are adoptees devalued as knowers in exchanges like this; we are pathologized. Gaslighting is an attempt on the part of someone—usually someone in a position of power over another—to make the other person feel "crazy" or doubt their own perceptions. Adoptees who deviate from the institution's expectations of "happy" and "grateful" are told they are psychologically damaged. This is ironic given what I will discuss below regarding adoptee mental health statistics and the fact that, arguably, many of us do suffer psychologically due to relinquishment trauma, abandonment fears, and other adoption-specific issues (see, e.g., Merritt 2022b). But this response of "get help" misses that point entirely. The audience is not taking the adoptee's concerns seriously and offering any real empathy. It's not genuine concern for adoptee mental health but rather a silencing tactic. The adoptee's claim that adoption harmed them is viewed as absurd and pathological, and hence, the adoptee is dismissed.

It is also worth noting the double standards that mark so many responses to adoptee testimony. In the same way Kukla (2014) demonstrates that women who are assertive are seen as bossy, rather than simply confident like their male counterparts, adoptees who speak against adoption are more likely to be labeled too angry or aggressive or, worse, be subjected to verbal abuse. One adoptee TikToker, who posts as "Viorica | Flat Out Adopted," posted a video discussing how her parents were denied a domestic adoption, went abroad to Romania to adopt, and constantly complained about how much she cost; in response, a commenter said, "Someone adopted you and you are complaining? So many kids in the foster system and you are complaining. Grow up." In the response video to this comment, there are comments saying her parents "overpaid," that her "mother didn't pay soon enough for the abortion," and that she was "another one that should have been swallowed."¹⁰ Even if adoptees use a polite tone or offer compelling and logical arguments, they are perceived as playing the perpetual victim or as being attention-seekers. On the other hand, in the rare case that the public does begin to take note of any negative outcomes associated with adoption, it is often because an AP or nonadoptee is speaking about them. One of the most cited books about this, *The Primal Wound* (Verrier 1993), is written by an adoptive mother. Again, it is not about the content of

¹⁰ Viorica | Flat Out Adopted (vio_flatoutadopted), "Replying to @sueatthebeach: If You Are Truly Curious about My Story Please Look at My Pinned Posts and Check Out My Playlists," May 2, 2024, https://www.tiktok.com/@vio_flatoutadopted/video/7364555620432907566?_r=1&_t=8ooZwgB1ds7.

the testimony. It is the *speaker* who is devalued as a knower. Tone is also irrelevant because even with the most calmly articulated testimony, adoptees are often labeled “bitter” or “too angry.” Despite so many scholars noting the productive use of anger—indeed, that it is “the emotion of injustice” (Bailey 2018, 93; see also Lorde 1997)—adoptees are not permitted to feel or express anything other than gratitude.

Besides facing the injunction to gratitude, adoptees are also subjected to epistemic violence. Kristie Dotson uses this term to extend Fricker’s work and more fully capture the injustices at play in many exchanges. Epistemic violence, according to Dotson (2011, 242), is “a failure of an audience to communicatively reciprocate, either intentionally or unintentionally, in linguistic exchanges owing to pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance is a reliable ignorance or a counterfactual incompetence that, in a given context, is harmful.” There are two ways this violence is enacted: Testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering. Testimonial quieting is similar in many ways to Collins’s and Fricker’s accounts in that it has to do with undervaluing a speaker and not seeing them as a genuine knower. *Testimonial smothering*, on the other hand, turns the focus toward the speaker themselves and how their speech is truncated when the audience demonstrates testimonial incompetence. The conditions under which testimonial smothering can be said to occur, according to Dotson (2011, 244), are as follows: “(1) the content of the testimony must be unsafe and risky; (2) the audience must demonstrate testimonial incompetence with respect to the content of the testimony to the speaker; and (3) testimonial incompetence must follow from, or appear to follow from, pernicious ignorance.” These three conditions amount to what Dotson refers to as a “coerced silencing,” meaning the speaker does not willfully smother their testimony. They do so because *it is unsafe not to*, and herein lies the epistemic violence. A person risks further marginalization, recrimination, perhaps even physical violence, if they speak a full and unabridged truth.

To briefly illustrate what Dotson means by some of these terms, I will use a typical exchange I have with interlocutors about adoption and why I find myself being testimonially smothered. As Dotson claims, smothering is a result of pernicious ignorance, which is a reliable ignorance about a given topic that causes harm. Many folks are reliably ignorant about adoption policies and practices, but not all of this ignorance will result in harm. For example, my hairstylist casually asks me about my family, and I bring up that I am adopted, to which she replies, “My cousin is adopted and it’s the most beautiful thing!” Here, she recites one of the reliably ignorant tropes I’d expect, but it is certainly not an act of epistemic violence. She is, however, demonstrating *testimonial incompetence*, which sets the stage for me to be testimonially smothered. Testimonial competence, Dotson argues, is something the *speaker* gauges about the interlocutor. It is *my* assessment, for example, that my hairstylist would find my testimony “clearly comprehensible and defeasibly

intelligible,” whereas to be testimonially incompetent, an interlocutor would appear to me to be incapable of understanding the “content of proffered testimony”; nor would they be able to detect their own failures to comprehend (Dotson 2011, 245). When someone leads with stereotypically positive adoption rhetoric, I am already inclined to see anything I say that runs counter to it to be “unsafe and risky,” but in my example, my hairstylist has not caused a coerced silence on my part just yet. If I suggest to her that there are systemic issues with adoption that make blanket statements like that problematic, and she replies with something like, “I’m sorry *you* had a bad experience being adopted, but most adoption stories are successful and happy,” then we are entering the territory of epistemic violence Dotson describes. I know now that she is testimonially incompetent. She is not *hearing* me genuinely, which is made clear by her ignoring the systemic level analysis I’ve offered, nor does she even recognize the gap in her own knowledge about adoption. This gap arises in part from her not having any lived experience as an adopted person but also from having only anecdotal evidence of the claim she is making. If she instead says something like, “Wow, I never thought about any of that,” or (one that I often hear when I bring these issues up) “It never occurred to me that the way money changes hands in adoption is problematic,” then this is a completely different scenario. Now I am in an exchange with a person who is aware of their ignorance and might therefore turn out to be what Fricker (2007) calls a “virtuous listener.” More often than not, however, the types of exchanges I’ve just mentioned end with me self-silencing because it has been made clear to me that nothing I say will shift the thinking of my interlocutor and, worse, that the more I try to do so, the more likely I am to be gaslit, pathologized, and dismissed.

Fricker claims that one of the secondary effects of testimonial injustice is that the speaker can lose “epistemic courage.” If I am consistently undervalued as a knower, then I will begin to internalize that message and essentially gaslight myself any time I think I might have something to add to the knowledge pool. This is what makes it “violence,” according to Dotson—it is coerced self-harm. But the harms of testimonial smothering are not limited to loss of courage. Women who self-silence, for example, are shown to experience more negative emotions, such as loneliness and low self-esteem (Besser, Flett, and Davis 2003), and feelings of alienation, rejection sensitivity, and depression rates are far higher among those who self-silence (London et al. 2012; Page, Stevens, and Galvin 1996). There are even cardiovascular costs to doing so, as some researchers (Jakubowski et al. 2022) have shown that self-silencing is associated with increased risk carotid atherosclerosis. Testimonial smothering, in other words, is a socially coerced, self-inflicted form of injustice that can cause lasting psycho-physical damage. Furthermore, Joyce (2013) documents how adoptee activists are often threatened with physical violence and even death. Taken together,

these considerations are powerful examples of how adoptees are subjected to epistemic violence.

We can now further elucidate how adoptees subjected to epistemic injustice are impacted psychologically, physiologically, and socially. There is virtually no research regarding adoptee self-silencing, nor have I found studies that link the institution of adoption with testimonial smothering. In a forthcoming book chapter, however, Ryan Gustafsson and I (2024) cite our own experiences with testimonial smothering and urge more research on the issue. We cite Sara Docan-Morgan (2011), for example, who discusses the ways transracially adopted persons engage in “topic avoidance” with their families, which is similar in many ways to testimonial smothering. Topic avoidance, as the name suggests, involves not so much truncating or watering down testimony but avoiding a subject altogether, which is what many BIPOC adoptees living in white homes have been shown to do. This behavior can be explained by the same coercive forces at play in Dotson’s account, which is supported by findings from other research (White et al. 2022) where microaggressions faced by transracial adoptees in their (white) adoptive homes are documented.

It could be argued that the epistemic violence just described is primarily racial discrimination, and therefore adoption has little or nothing to do with the harm experienced. An intersectional framing of these issues would suggest that it is not an exclusive disjunction, however. Rather than one or the other, it could very well be *both* being adopted *and* being subjected to racism. These overlapping oppressive forces likely operate in tandem. One might still object that adoption, unlike racism, is not an oppressive institution and certainly not something that would inflict epistemic harm. This is why I think coining the term *adoptism* is important—it highlights the ways adoption qua institution is distinct from but intersects with racism, as well as classism, colonialism, ableism, and sanism.

Returning to my own narrative, being a white, same-race domestic adoptee, I did not experience the racial microaggressions that some research (White et. al 2022) has found to occur in transracially adoptive families, but I can say with certainty that I have smothered my own testimony for the sake of safety or to preserve my mental health and have been subjected to other forms of silencing. Being told my whole life that my parents were too young and poor to parent me reflects the classist assumptions the adoption industry relies upon, but more importantly, it exemplifies the injunction to gratitude characteristic of adoptist ideology. By equating “good parenting” and “happy life” with “having wealthy parents,” adoptism automatically renders adoptees who question any of this as pathologically ungrateful. After all, in a capitalist society, no sane person would choose to live with less money, so an adoptee expressing sadness about not growing up with their less economically advantaged family is “mad.” Hence, adoptism also intersects in important ways with sanism (Perlin 1992).

The adoptee narratives curated by society are an example of another facet of epistemic injustice, what Calder (2021) refers to as “testimonial throttling.” Rather than focus on the victim of epistemic harm, Calder examines the perpetrator and how they often control the narrative. Much like one can “throttle” a car, which controls its power output, “testimonial throttling controls knowledge output”; and just as throttling can occur physically as a means to control a subject, “limiting access to the pool of knowledge abuses the marginalised” (Calder 2021, 11). Calder includes identity prejudice as a reason for truncating information, and though many would be unwilling to admit any identity bias against adoptees, we must keep in mind that biases are often not conscious. Moreover, thinking of the larger institution of adoption as the power source, it is clear that throttling happens as a direct result of institutional practices—sealing of birth records, falsifying of birth documents, and so on. Thus, even though identity prejudice might not be explicit, the prevailing “rules of the game” are to treat adoptees as incapable of handling all the information. The same is true of birth parents, who are not permitted access to information about their children at all in closed adoptions; even in open adoptions, they are throttled by APs who can deem it unnecessary to continue communication at any point. In my case, the effect of all this throttling was to grow up being afraid my own parents would come and steal me away and being reassured that no, that will never happen, because they are legally prohibited from knowing anything about me.

Another element to consider is that APs too might be throttled by the adoption industry. I suspect that today, with so many adult adoptee activists speaking out and the growing recognition of the ways adoption impacts adoptees, this might not be the case. But several decades ago, when I was adopted, it is clear to me that my APs were not provided with all the information necessary to make good decisions about adopting me. In turn, I was also given partial or truncated information. This is how I frame the radical shift in thinking about adoption I’ve undergone the last several years. Until I obtained this information kept from me, I could not even formulate these thoughts. I didn’t have words to express the feelings I was experiencing, many of which I was ashamed to feel at all.

As an analogous case, consider Fricker’s (2007), recounting of Susan Brownmiller’s (1999) memoir, regarding how revolutionary it was for women to realize the postpartum depression (PPD) they were experiencing was a legitimate illness. Before this consciousness-raising occurred, women not only had no social support but didn’t even have a frame for understanding their feelings. Instead, these women pathologized *themselves* by assuming they did not have a real debilitating mental health issue but rather had, as one of them says, a “personal deficiency.” Something was wrong with them *as mothers*, in other words. The lack of subjective understanding surrounding PPD resulted directly from a lack of collective understanding about it and constitutes what Fricker refers to as a “hermeneutical

injustice.” As she argues, this absence of collective knowledge was not due simply to oversight or underdeveloped science or technology but due to “structural inequality and power between men and women” (Fricker 2007, 149). A sort of “hermeneutical darkness” clouded women’s minds and prevented them from both social and personal understanding of their experiences. And men were complicit in this hermeneutical injustice. By pathologizing women as “bad mothers” and assuming something inherently wrong with them, they prevented women with PPD from getting the care they actually needed. In terms of Dotson’s work, we could say this was owing to pernicious ignorance regarding the phenomenology of postpartum experience.

Similarly, without the hermeneutical scaffolds—that is, the collective resources and interpretive framework—to fully understand adoption qua institution, adoptees are testimonially throttled, both individually and as a group. Not only is knowledge purposefully kept from us, but in its place, we are offered pre-scripted narratives that are supposed to be our “life stories”—namely, that adoption is a blessing, a gift, and something for which we are grateful. Just as the women suffering from PPD found validation and liberation tapping into a heretofore restricted knowledge pool, my own experiences finding other adoptees who shared my emotions, along with studies and literature I never knew existed, were life-changing. It was also an angering experience to realize that so many other adoptees in the world shared in my grief and I had never been encouraged engage with them. Thus, adoptees are often throttled individually by having information kept from them, but they are also alienated from a community of knowers, thereby limiting the extent to which they can participate in the production and dissemination of knowledge—knowledge *about their own lived experience*.

Fricker argues that hermeneutical injustice is prior to and the condition for epistemic injustice, but in a later piece, Fricker and Katharine Jenkins (2017) discuss hermeneutical marginalization as an even more fundamental precursor. Whereas hermeneutical injustice ensures that a speaker will be rendered unintelligible due to a lack of collective knowledge about that speaker’s lived experiences, hermeneutical marginalization is the foundation of this injustice. This is because hermeneutical marginalization involves disallowing an entire group (or subset of a group) from speaking on behalf of that group. As Fricker and Jenkins (2017, 268) claim, “Someone counts as hermeneutically marginalized insofar as they belong to a social group that under-contributes to the common pool of concepts and social meanings.” In the case of adoptees, as I have shown, we undercontribute to discourse surrounding the very institution that we are forced into, and those of us critical of that institution are especially underrepresented.

As I have noted, my usage of the term *adoptism* to describe adoptee marginalization, is inspired by Baril’s (2023, 2020) use of the term *suicidism*, which captures the unique ways suicidal people are discriminated against. Another

important feature of his work is his claiming that by being systematically underrepresented in suicidology, suicidal people are harmed even more by the same institution that is supposedly invested in “saving” them. Without a clear understanding of the emic/insider perspective regarding what it’s like to be suicidal, policies are often enacted that ultimately dissuade suicidal people from seeking help. Likewise, the “injunction to live,” much like the injunction to gratitude, tacitly assumes that no sane person would rationally choose to die, and thus, all suicidal people—just like all ungrateful adoptees—are mad.

I think I have successfully demonstrated that adoptees are harmed in their capacities as knowers, and furthermore, I’ve offered a framework—adoptism—for understanding how these harms are constituted and sustained. This alone should suffice to rethink our adoptist assumptions, but I want to add one final consideration—namely, the interconnection of these epistemic harms and the material, social, psychological, and physiological harms that occur as a result of unchecked pernicious ignorance regarding adoption. Finally, I suggest ways to rectify these injustices.

5. Redressing the Harms of Adoptism

Studies indicate that adopted people are at greater risk for several concerning health issues, which, if true, would make it all the more prudent to begin seriously listening to adoptees who are critical of adoption. Findings from these studies show the following about adoptees:

- They are overrepresented in mental health treatment settings (Borders, Penny, and Portnoy 2000; Cubito and Brandon 2000; Baden and Wiley 2007).
- They have increased rates of depression and anxiety (Melero and Sánchez-Sandoval 2017), OCD (Askeland et al. 2015), and eating disorders (Strand et al. 2020; Holden 1991).
- They are more likely than nonadopted persons to experience substance abuse problems (Yoon et al. 2012).
- They are at least twice as likely to attempt suicide than a nonadoptees (Campo-Arias, Egurrola-Pedraza, and Herazo 2020; Keyes et al. 2013; Slap, Goodman, and Huang 2001).
- They score much lower on self-esteem assessments (Borders, Penny, and Portnoy 2000).
- They are more likely to exhibit antisocial personality traits (Westermeyer et al. 2015; Cadoret et al. 1990).

- They have more autoimmune disorders than nonadoptees (John-Henderson et al. 2020; Whitaker-Worth, Bayart, and Benedetti 2015; Miller and Hendrie 2000).

While it is not clear that being adopted or being relinquished is the causal mechanism behind these correlations—there are likely several contributing factors including genetic predispositions and other developmental stressors—the fact that adoptees suffer in these ways deserves attention. Every major adoption agency, along with the US Children’s Bureau, gives advice to prospective adoptive parents that includes the idea that it is traumatic to be separated from one’s family, even at a very young age (see Child Welfare Information Gateway 2022). I (Merritt 2022b) have suggested, regarding infant adoption, that trauma occurring in the first two years of life—often referred to as “preverbal trauma”— is likely a contributing factor to the social-emotional issues many adoptees face. As Bessel van der Kolk (2015) notes, in cases of early trauma, the autonomic nervous system becomes wired for protection, rather than connection. In turn, given the pervasive sense of danger, negative coping schemas develop, and these can include things like compulsivity, substance abuse, and restrictive dieting as the child matures into adulthood. Negative schema development as a result of preverbal trauma often happens below the conscious radar, because there are no episodic memories tied to infancy. However, it is argued that these negative experiences are remembered, even if they are not consciously recalled.¹¹ Adoption and relinquishment, in other words, are arguably “adverse childhood experiences” (Burke Harris 2018).

The extent to which adoptee development is impacted by relinquishment bears very little on my argument about the epistemic injustices adoptees face. I think I have successfully shown how adoptees are disenfranchised by adoptist ideology, regardless of what all these studies truly indicate. My point in raising the issue is that it should be yet another reason for us to listen to those with lived experience. While we cannot conclude that adoption/relinquishment is the cause of adoptees being more likely to attempt suicide, the fact that they are is an alarming bit of data that cannot be brushed aside. Studies continue to emerge, as I write this paper, indicating, for example, that adoptees and birth parents alike are harmed by plenary adoption practices in numbers that are statistically significant.¹² By continuing to subject

¹¹ For the connection between autonomic nervous system dysregulation and infant-maternal separation, see Bergman (2019, 2014); Radcliff, Baylor, and Rybarczyk (2016); and Porges (2011). See also studies of babies placed in NICU and outcomes of even brief separation (Császár-Nagy and Bókkon 2018; Sanders and Hall 2018).

¹² See, e.g., the reports described by Leon Elias (2023) at <https://www.pac-uk.org/pac-uk-publish-big-consult-findings/>.

adoptees to hermeneutical marginalization, we risk never getting a full picture of adoptee phenomenology *from the perspective of those who are adopted*, and hence, opportunities to reduce adoptee suffering are foreclosed.

Most importantly, my account points to the need to more critically examine adoption qua institution and to resist the uncritical assumption that this institution is an inevitability. Conflating the duty to help children in need with the duty to participate in plenary adoption is problematic because it overlooks the material conditions that establish vulnerable families in the first place and, furthermore, how racist, classist, and ableist ideologies drive these material conditions along (Dettlaff 2020; Dettlaff and Boyd 2020; Raz, Dettlaff, and Edwards 2021). It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine all the aspects of what scholars like Dorothy Roberts (2022, 2014) refer to as “family policing” and of how adoption is a cog in that machine. However, one can easily imagine that in a better world—one in which “poverty” was not coded by child welfare agencies as “neglect,” where Black parents were not automatically assumed to be less capable of parenting than white parents, where instead of paying fifty thousand dollars to adopt an infant, that money were spent empowering birth parents to parent their children—plenary adoption would all but cease, and it would certainly not be considered a moral duty (see, e.g., Merritt, 2022c). Redressing the racist, classist, colonialist, ableist, and sanist ideologies that make adoption seem so necessary is not an easy task, and certainly will not occur overnight. To this end, I recognize what I am suggesting is an *ideal* argument. It could be argued, in other words, that given the world we *actually* inhabit, adoption might be the only way to provide children in need with loving homes. However, this either-or thinking overlooks options that do not involve permanent dissolution of families, such as legal guardianship and kinship care. These options, it turns out, are not incentivized by child welfare agencies. We need to interrogate these issues with more scrutiny and see how the institution of adoption functions in tandem with so many other social injustices. Likewise, inspecting our own cognitive dissonances regarding adoption is crucial. Laura Briggs’s work (2020, 2012), which reasonably stirs outrage regarding family separations at the US-Mexico border, should give us pause to question why we are not similarly outraged at families—especially Black families—being “torn apart” (Roberts 2022) every day because of structural inequalities and racism. Dismantling adoptism means, therefore, confronting *all* these intersecting injustices and reckoning with the fact that the institution of adoption emerges from them as a supposed inevitability. Adoption appears so inevitable, in fact, that it gets lauded as a heroic act of rescuing *children*, thereby neglecting the *families* that are in need of saving.

To be sure, what I’ve just said above requires a great deal more explication, which exceeds the scope of this paper, but it is what I have come to believe, as a scholar, and as an adopted person, who is in community with many adoptees, former

foster youth, donor-conceived persons, and birth parents. This position, like so much of adoption-critical discourse from adoptees, is all too often dismissed, as I have tried to show here through an analysis of epistemic injustice as it occurs in an adoptist paradigm. If we are to truly assess the extent to which adoption as an institution is harmful and whether family preservation measures, such as promoting guardianship over plenary adoption, would lead to better outcomes for adoptees and birth families, we will not do so by continuing to silence adoptee voices. All adoptee voices need to be centered in discussions of adoption, much like we ought to center the voices of members of any marginalized group when talking about what it's like to experience that form of marginalization. However, as I have argued here, in adoption studies, it is especially important that adoptees who are critical of the institution that produced them be allowed to speak and that we actively *hear* them. Otherwise, we risk upholding the same narratives that so many adoptees claim are harming us, and moreover, we perpetuate the myth that adoption is an inevitable, necessary, and positive aspect of society. It is time for feminist theory to confront adoptism, lest it continue to uncritically support child welfare policies that are far from child-centered and certainly not in line with what intersectional feminism purports to uphold.

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