Coming Out of the Fog of War and Adoption Trauma: Central American Adoptees and Social Media Support Groups

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By looking at the intersections between social media networking, affect theory, and digital meaning making, this article considers the ways in which children adopted from El Salvador and Guatemala to the United States during a period of war and political instability have used support groups on Facebook to build community and find acceptance for their hybrid identities. Drawing on 16 interviews with now young adult adoptees, I establish how Central American adoptees use online community building as an aid in suturing online and offline worlds in their efforts to create visibility and belonging for transnational/racial adoptees. Still, I argue that these are contested spaces, which may be better suited for individual rather than collective healing.

Keywords: affective networks, Facebook, Central America, Latinx media studies, adoption, digital meaning making

Displaced by civil war, transnational acts of state violence, and a system of international adoption with little government oversight, tens of thousands of infants and children were adopted from El Salvador and Guatemala into U.S., European, and other White Western homes beginning in the 1970s through the early 2000s (Briggs, 2012, 2020; Nolan, 2019; Rossi, 2022). Central American adoptees are a unique part of the Latinx population to consider, in part because they were often brought up by White adoptive parents in White communities completely outside of their birth cultures. Although commonality with other 1.5 and 2nd generation U.S. Central Americans can be found in shared backgrounds that are full of uncertainty and fragmentation in relation to their connection to Central America, adoptees differ in that they were not brought to the United States with a cultural representative or relative who may have helped them maintain their birth culture. They also did not come to the United States on their own and were not necessarily brought up near Latinx population centers. Consequently, social media and other digital technologies have been instructive tools for transnational/racial adoptees to explore their identities and lessen the psychological stress caused by being removed from their birth cultures and communities.

Accordingly, this study focuses on how adoptees from Central America digitally make meaning of the state violence that culminated in their adoption and the symbolic violence that often results from being a child of color raised in an adoptive White home governed by colorblind ideologies. I examine how Central American adoptees use online support groups to build community and fight feelings of isolation. By doing so, this study brings insight to this underexplored outcome of U.S. Cold War politics and the ways in which

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social media can be used to bring visibility to shared trauma and help individuals feel less alone. Further, by proposing the framework of "coming out of the fog," this study provides a critical vocabulary for understanding the "fog" of imperialism that haunts the international adoption industry, as well as the "fogginess," or complexity, of online community building built through affect. Through interviews completed with Salvadoran and Guatemalan adoptees, I discuss the intricacies of adoptee digital organizing and establish the potential for transnational/racial adoptees to use social media networking as a tool for enacting change that crosses the boundary from online to offline. Although transnational/racial adoptees share the common origin of adoption, it is significant to note that adoptee lived experience is not monolithic, and as a result online spaces for adoptees remain sites of negotiation.

The research questions guiding this article are as follows.

RQ1:   How have transnational/racial Central American adoptees used social media networking on Facebook to make meaning of state and symbolic violence?

RQ2:   How does the proposed framework of "coming out of the fog," a phrase commonly used by the participants in this study to signal the ways in which transnational/racial adoptees begin to question the adoption-as-rescue paradigm, help us understand the affordances and limitations of adoptee community building online?

This study begins with a brief overview of the theoretical framework used, which considers the intersections between social media networking, affect, and digital meaning making to examine the phenomenon of online community building centered around emotion, feelings, and sentiment. Next, it outlines the methodology and the ethical considerations taken in producing knowledge with and about marginalized Latinx communities. The findings and discussion section begins by presenting an overview of the paradigm of "coming out of the fog," which this study offers as a critical lens for understanding and measuring how digital spaces provide a structure that transnational/racial adoptees can use to make meaning of state violence and complicate White savior adoption-as-rescue narratives. Subsequently, three key findings from this study of Salvadoran and Guatemalan adoptee online groups are presented that establish how adoptees use social networking to "come out of the fog," find belonging, and suture online and offline spaces in their work to create visibility for transnational/racial adoptees. I argue that digital community building can make offline lives more livable by affording transnational/racial adoptees the opportunity to connect to others with similar lived experiences and consider avenues for enacting change online and offline. However, online spaces remain contested spaces, and consequently online adoptee groups have the potential to more closely facilitate individual, rather than collective, healing. The conclusion reflects on these findings and offers suggestions for further research.

Theoretical Considerations

Affective Networks, Digital Meaning Making, and Finding Community Online

Scholarship on online networks has begun to illuminate the dynamics of digital community building and consider its affordances and limitations for the fostering of emotional connections and affective

networking. boyd (2010) uses the phrase "networked publics" to describe "the space constructed through networked technologies and . . . the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (p. 40). She claims social networking sites such as Facebook are "networked technologies" that have reorganized "how information flows and how people interact with information and each other" (boyd, 2010, p. 41). In other words, social media sites complicate past understandings of publics through their structural affordances that allow for among other things, scalability, searchability, and the formation of relationships un-reliant on geographic proximity. "Networked publics," however, do not automatically constitute community. Indeed, the affordances of digital structures also come with their limitations. As Van Dijck (2013) argues, social networking sites' appropriation of key terms such as "social," "collaboration," and "friend" "resonate with communalist jargon of early utopian visions of the Web as a space that inherently enhances social activity. In reality, the meaning of these words has increasingly been informed by automated technologies that direct human sociality" (p. 11). Put another way, Van Dijck (2013) brings attention to the contradictory nature of new media, in which social media companies have rhetorically presented themselves (and been represented in popular discourse) as platforms for enhancing human networks and interaction while simultaneously being engineered and automated systems that "manipulate connections" through algorithmic design (p. 9).

Several scholars are likewise documenting how networked publics are offering new ways of performing affect and/or building affective connections (Aziz, 2022; Döveling, 2015; Döveling, Harju, & Sommer, 2018; Papacharissi, 2014, 2015; Rajabi, 2021; Wilding & Winarnita, 2022). Papacharissi's (2015) notion of "affective publics," for example, gives a name to "networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (p. 311). Papacharissi (2015) uses this term to understand engagement around specific Twitter hashtags that materialize around news events and social movements that drive or are driven by emotional attachment. Likewise, Döveling and colleagues (2018) introduce the concept of "digital affect cultures," as "relational, contextual, globally emergent spaces in the digital environment where affective flows construct atmospheres of emotional and cultural belonging by way of emotional resonance" (p. 1). They demonstrate how traumatic events such as terrorist attacks or natural disasters can create a sense of belonging forged through shared emotional sentiment collected through hashtags and regardless of geographical distance between users. Papacharissi (2015) warns, however, that one must not conflate a sense of belonging with an actual community engaged in changemaking: "depending on context, these affective attachments may either self-propagate a movement to generate community, and/or entrap people in a loop of sustained spectatorship" (p. 311).

In relation to this study, both scholars and adoptees have established a meaning of community that goes beyond spectatorship or a simple emotional attachment. Parks (2010) considers "virtual communities" to be spaces in which group members can "engage in collective action," "share rituals and information," and "find a sense of belonging and attachment" (p. 108). They are also spaces in which there might be a pattern of "interaction among members" and a "self-awareness" of being a community (Parks, 2010, p. 108). In other words, there is an active element to virtual and nonvirtual community building that relies on participation. Similarly, Guatemalan adoptee Melissa Ramos (2021) defines community building as referring to the "activities, practices, and policies that support and foster positive connections among individuals, groups, organizations, and geographic and functional communities" (para. 4). In the case of adoptees, Ramos notes, community building is "founded on a shared identity" and is distinct from

"community action," which involves organizing "those affected by public or private decisions or non-decisions where the goal is to challenge existing political, social, and economic structures and processes" (para. 6). The distinction between the two is an important one to make because as this study demonstrates, adoptees are not a monolith and take various paths in their approaches to identity construction and digital community building and action. Stuart Hall (1990) reminds us that diasporic identities are formed by the ways in which individuals and groups are positioned by outside forces, such as the media and other cultural institutions that mediate social meanings, and the way they position themselves in relation to others. As some adoptees come of age and begin to wrestle with and against the disciplining power of national or familial politics, they may turn to online communities to find belonging, negotiate cultural identity, or advocate for change in international adoption systems. Still, as scholars Baym (2006) and Gray (2009) argue, "offline contexts permeate and influence online situations, and online situations and experiences always feed back into offline experience" (Baym, 2006, p. 86). In other words, the separation between an individual's online and offline lives has no clear boundary. Youth, like Central American adoptees, use new media as just one space to find belonging and may suture online and offline communities in their search for public space and legibility (Gray, 2009, p. 15).

Although much contemporary scholarship has turned to Facebook and Twitter to consider contemporary journalistic flows and the spread of misinformation, communication and Latinx scholars have less frequently studied the ways in which private groups on Facebook function as significant sites of support. There are several studies on Facebook groups for people seeking health support, but these reports often rely on content analysis rather than exploring the root reasons of why people have turned to or been forced to rely on Facebook groups to find help through virtual communities. Likewise, Döveling and colleagues (2018) and Papacharissi (2014, 2015) offer significant theorizations on the intersections between social media sites, community, and affect, but their respective studies, which mainly focus on Twitter, do not consider the ways affective publics and digital affect cultures are functioning in less visible online spaces like Facebook groups. This study emphasizes that adoptees are in fact being driven to connect by "flows of affect online" (Döveling et al., 2018, p. 1), but they are doing so in ways that seek to make their lives more livable both online and offline. It further establishes how accumulations of online affect can lead to community action offline.

Notably, this study connects conceptualizations of affective networks with what Rajabi (2021) has discussed as digital meaning making to highlight how online communities can be a space for users to express emotions or feelings that are denied validity in offline contexts. Rajabi (2021) uses the concept of "symbolic trauma" to work through how digital media users and communities make meaning of suffering caused by state and symbolic violence and to give a critical vocabulary to those disabled by social and political systems whose suffering is otherwise made invisible by those in power. In other words, symbolic trauma, which can be both physical and psychological, is trauma unrecognized and/or denied by traditional hegemonic systems, but it is potentially rendered legible in digital worlds. Critical adoption scholars have previously established the invisible psychic trauma of transnational/racial adoptees that results from being removed from birth families/cultures and/or being raised through the principles of colorblind kinship that demand feelings of gratitude from adoptees (Eng, 2010; Merritt, 2021; Park Nelson, 2007; Rossi, 2022). As such, this study foregrounds how digital community spaces have enabled Central American adoptees to recognize these structures of symbolic violence to which they have been subjected and proposes the framework of "coming

out of the fog" to give a name to the act of questioning the emotionally stifling adoption-as-rescue paradigm, as well as to measure the affordances and limitations of digital meaning making after symbolic trauma.

Methodology and Ethical Considerations

This study weaves together analysis of adoptee social media organizing and qualitative interviews with Salvadoran and Guatemalan adoptees to garner a better understanding of the affordances and limitations of social media networking in creating community and political change both online and offline. Following Sandvig and Hargittai's (2015) discussion of digital research methods, this study takes an instrumental approach to the study of digital media to explore how social media as an instrument or tool can provide new insights into the complexity of community building and digital diasporas. Put another way, this study is most interested in how digital media and technologies function as an instrument or "as a vehicle, a medium" for talking about race and cultural identity, state and symbolic violence, adoption trauma, adoptee lived experience, and the future (Akindes, 2003, p. 155). In what ways is new media, such as social media networks, a contributor to the everyday lived experiences and evolving identities of Central American adoptees?

I conducted 16 semistructured, qualitative interviews with Central American adoptees, including seven Guatemalan adoptees and nine Salvadoran adoptees. All 16 have partaken in one of five online adoptee groups from which I solicited participants. I recruited interviewees by first asking group moderators if they would be interested in participating, and then I utilized snowball sampling. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 42 and were adopted between 1980 and 1997. Four men and 12 women participated in my interviews. Interviews took between 45 minutes to one hour to complete and were primarily conducted over Zoom. I began by asking individuals to a share a bit about their adoption journey and how their perceptions about their adoption and cultural identity have developed over time. Subsequently, participants were asked about their digital media use and the role of social media networking in finding belonging. Names have been anonymized to protect the privacy of my participants. To protect the privacy of these online groups, I also mostly refrain from discussing the specific content or affects present on their message boards. Rather, I have chosen to primarily use affective belonging as my main analysis and to rely on the responses I received from my participants to establish the complexity of these online spaces.

Past studies have shown that as transnational Central American youth come of age and attend college or leave their home for the first time, they become interested in issues of identity, and in some cases, they learn about their birth countries' violent histories for the first time (Coutin, 2016; Menjívar, 2002; Trujillo, 2021). Likewise, although some critical adoption scholars have utilized transnational/racial adoptee oral histories in their historical recoveries of the exploitative system of international adoption (Kim, 2010; Varzally, 2017), this study adds to the conversation by specifically exploring the perspectives of Central American adoptees and the role of new media in adoptee community building and identity negotiation.

Further, the methodology of this study is ethically aligned with the goals of Aparicio and colleagues (2022), who position Latinx ethnography as "homework" rather than fieldwork, which they see as "an aspirational, future-oriented, and coalitional practice of ethnography that recognizes our research partners and interlocuters as collaborators and intellectuals in their own right and demands a deeper and more sustained personal and political commitment" (p. xxiii). "Home" has a second significance in the context of

this research because I myself am a Salvadoran adoptee who has found community, connection, and emotional validation in the online adoptee diaspora. Indeed, by utilizing the notion of "coming out of the fog" as a lens from which to understand digital meaning making, I aim to "listen in solidarity" with my participants and foreground Central American adoptees as engaged in their own analytics outside of the academy (Aparicio et al., 2022, pp. xxv, xxix). By doing so, this study inserts Central American and transnational/racial adoptee subjectivities into the fields of Latinx and communication studies through their own voices and knowledge production.

Findings and Discussion: The Dynamics of Adoptee Online Network Building

This study demonstrates the affordances and limitations of digital community building for transnational/racial adoptees from El Salvador and Guatemala. It begins by conceptualizing "coming out of the fog" as a framework for understanding and measuring how digital spaces provide a structure for adoptees to question the adoption-as-rescue paradigm and circumvent the emotional regulation required by the politics of colorblind kinship practiced by many adoptive families. From there, the study establishes three key findings. First, despite the utopian promises of digital community building, some adoptees fail to find meaning/support online. Second, online groups of adoptees have found success in using their digital platforms to create substantive change offline and therefore have worked to suture online and offline lived experiences. Finally, digital groups built around collective affect remain contested spaces in which adoptees grapple with divergent ideas on how to make meaning of adoption trauma.

Defining the "Fog"

The phrase "coming out of the fog" is popular within transnational/racial adoptee circles and signals a rejection of the White savior adoption-as-rescue narrative that is commonly told by adoptive parents, social workers, and popular media. This study uses this concept as described by adoptees themselves to better interrogate the complex politics of online community building among the Central American adoptee diaspora. Adoptees have described "being in the fog" as being an adoptee who has internalized the Western adoption-as-rescue paradigm (Yue, Santizo-Malafronti, & Vazquez-Kelly, 2020). In other words, a transnational/racial adoptee living in the "fog" views their adoption as an apolitical act of love and fails to interrogate the geopolitical factors that make children from the Global South into adoptable products (Briggs, 2020; McKee, 2019). As interviews for this study were completed, it was a phrase repeated by several participants. I now turn to some of my participants to better explain the "fog."

One of this study's participants, Kyle, was adopted from Guatemala in 1996. He is a participant in two online Guatemalan adoptee groups, as well as a few other adoptee digital collectives. As he explains, he had been living in

> the fog of whiteness, the fog of privilege, classism, the fog of imperialism, just like believing everything we've been told since we were kids and really thinking that that's the whole truth without doing any questioning of that; and then coming out of the fog is when you really start to realize, "Oh, there's a lot more here."

In other words, for Kyle, to come out of the fog means to question the systems that enable the international adoption industry, the ways that racial projects shape transnational social relations, and the myth of American exceptionalism.

Another participant, Angela, was adopted from Guatemala in 1997. She is a participant in two online adoptee groups and was in reunion with her birth family. Her narrative is one of several Guatemalan adoptees whom I spoke to, who told me they were trafficked. At the time of her birth, Angela's mother's doctor had told her that she had died shortly after birth, but in fact, she was taken by the doctor and adopted to the United States. For Angela, the fog can be hard to escape, particularly when one is

> raised in a family of primarily White people, and you're in a community of primarily White people . . . you are socialized to believe this idea of, to accept a perspective on your adoption that comes from the White American perspective. And coming out of the fog means, you're reconnecting with the fact that you are not a White American, and you have a reality that faces you in a very different way.

In other words, the model of colorblind kinship that governs many adoptive families confines transnational/racial adoptees to the fog, or a mythology in which they may ignore or bury their racial otherness, accept popular images or rhetoric of their birth countries as backward, and consistently be told that their birth families were incapable of providing any semblance of a "good" life for them. Coming out of the fog signals a contestation of colorblind and colonial politics and a rejection of the phantom lives commonly constructed by adoptive parents that imagine a child's "life [without being adopted] as located in a grim and soulless orphanage and followed by a life of street crime" (Honig, 2005, p. 218). To come out of the fog, then, is to interrogate the systems that allow for an adoptees' physical and psychological displacements from their birth families, countries, and cultures.

Notably, to come out of the fog can also be a painful experience in which one must confront the ghosts haunting them. Gordon (2008) uses the concept of "haunting" to describe the instances "when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's in your blind spot comes into view" (p. xvi). Still, given the transparent and blurry nature of ghosts, these apparitions may not always be identifiable. As Stoler (2006) argues, "to be haunted is to be frequented by and possessed by a force that not always bares a proper name" (p. 1). In other words, to be haunted by the violence of empire is to not necessarily have the language to describe or the power to make others aware of the pain of forced family displacement and ghostly hauntings. This article works through how "coming out of the fog" is both a process enhanced by adoptee digital community building and digital meaning making, as well as a descriptor of the murkiness, or fogginess, of contested community spaces. To recognize the fog is to give a name to the imperial ideologies behind international adoption, a way of making meaning of the state violence and symbolic trauma that some transnational/racial adoptees from Central America have faced, and a way of recovering memory of the effects and afterlives of the United States' Cold War intervention in the region. However, it is not a universal process, and as evidenced by this study's interviews with Central American adoptees, it can have different meanings for everyone dependent on their own relationship to their adoption. Rajabi (2021) argues, "users go online to be a part of something, and they participate to establish a new meaning-making schema, and thus new understandings of their

lives" (p. 53). Yet this study also seeks to consider how some adoptees fail to find meaning of their ghostly pasts online.

Salvadoran Adoptees and the Struggle for Community

For Salvadoran adoptees, community building has proven to be challenging and fractured. The creation of online support groups for Central American adoptees has often been tied to connections made after completing at-home DNA ancestry kits. Several of the women who participated in this study founded or act as moderators of these spaces for Salvadoran adoptees to congregate, and they began their own personal adoption journeys with *23andMe* to try to find birth relatives. Still, Salvadoran adoptee Laura's narrative complicates the utopian aspects of affective publics and digital meaning making. Laura was adopted into a Mormon family in Utah in 1989. Like several of the Salvadoran adoptees I spoke to, she is now married and has children. For her and others, having children was a moment that was significant in their adoption journey because they wanted to share their birth culture and histories with their children. As such, Laura turned to the Internet to seek a virtual space to discuss her at-home DNA test results and compare relative lists with other adoptees. She was unable to find any Salvadoran adoptee Facebook groups but was invited to join a Guatemalan adoptee page by a Guatemalan adoptee who was listed as a third cousin on *23andMe* and with whom she had been messaging. She recalls being "very involved" in the group and relating to fellow Central American adoptees "who were confused about how to feel about being adopted or about being taken from their biological culture." She added, "I was very loud on that Facebook page, and I was helping so many people, you know, with their DNA questions and these unanswered questions they had within themselves." She described exchanging DNA relative lists with the connections she was making, but her search for mutual relatives always came up empty. At one point she posted in the group, "Is anybody out there and from El Salvador, anybody have any relatives from El Salvador on their relative lists?" She recalls feeling hurt after people responded to her posts with comments like, "This is a Guatemalan adoptee page; you should go to an El Salvador one." This is just one example of the boundary-making practices that Central American adoptees in online diasporic groups have taken part in, and it demonstrates the complexities of building a community around a confined notion of identity, which in this case was tied to national origins. Disillusioned with the Guatemalan group, Laura started her own page dedicated to Salvadoran adoptees, and it has slowly accrued over 30 members. Given the smaller size of the group, however, it has struggled to maintain active conversations among members.

The lack of activity in these smaller groups, which do not have the experience of meeting in person, speaks to the difficulty of performing vulnerability among strangers online. Online spaces both lessen and reinforce distance between users (boyd, 2010; Farquhar, 2012). As Merritt (2021) has noted, adoptees from across the country and even the globe can be a part of these groups and take solace in knowing that there are others with their shared origins and shared emotional sentiment that has arisen from being adopted. However, I would add, a lack of homogeneity of lived experience can make it hard to open up to others, particularly when there is little conversation already happening. Laura's upbringing in a Mormon family, for example, would have been a very different experience from an upbringing in a secular family. Laura also ties the struggle for community building to a "hush-hush" culture around U.S. intervention in Central America, in which a lot of adoptees do not know about the history of the Salvadoran Civil War and as a result may not know the contexts of their own adoption. There is also an important emotional labor aspect. Laura and other group moderators

have felt an added responsibility to actively post conversation starters, garner traction, and be there as a resource and support for others. This can come with a toll. As Laura notes:

> It's been a long time since I posted on there [the group page she founded], not as often as I should, because I go through these dips, you know, where I just don't want to think about it. It consumes me a lot, and sometimes I just don't want to think about it.

A few months after I spoke with Laura, she turned her moderation duties over to another adoptee because she needed to take a break from the group and from trying to increase its activity.

Papacharissi (2015) notes that her conceptualization of affective publics is influenced by Williams's (1977) work on "structures of feeling," or the emotions, moods, and atmospheres that generations are born out of and raised in and that define a moment in time (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015). Papacharissi (2015) seeks to understand how digital media effect narration and structures of storytelling, arguing:

> Networked structures of feeling . . . help us tell stories about who we are, who we imagine we might be, and how we might get there. The same stories that may inspire powerful disruption, accumulate and diffuse intensity and tension, or simply, serve as an organically generated digital manifestation of who we are, and who we might like to be. (p. 311)

This study emphasizes that transnational/racial adoptees telling their narratives is an organic or natural reaction to the state and symbolic violence that has resulted in their forced displacement in a geographical and psychological sense. The digital manifestation of their trauma in networked spaces, such as private Facebook groups, is simply how they make meaning of the complexity of adoption or how they begin to come out of the fog. These digital spaces are a place where digital sufferers "negotiate their place in the broader world given the catastrophic feeling that broke down their sense of place in the world" (Rajabi, 2021, p. 40). Still, it is significant to question these utopian ideas about digital narration in affective publics. As the case of Laura illustrates, online spaces for the narration of trauma can be extremely foggy places, in which adoptees may face hostility and/or a lack of engagement and connection with others resulting in their inability to digitally make meaning of their ghostly pasts.

Guatemala Adoptees Groups and the Suturing of Online and Offline Lived Experiences

Guatemalan adoptees have also founded and facilitated online groups to ease feelings of isolation and painful pasts. Two organizations, Next Generation Guatemala (NGG) and Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots, run various online platforms for Guatemalan adoptees. Although both are based in the United States, these groups are open to members of the Guatemalan adoptee diaspora residing in various countries across the globe. One difference between the two groups is that Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots distinguishes itself by being an incorporated nonprofit; it was founded by a few members of Next Generation Guatemala that sought to use their business and tech start-up experience and acumen to build strategic partnerships with outside companies and organizations with the purpose of integrating themselves and their members into the greater Guatemalan community. Both groups offer community spaces across mediums, including Facebook, Instagram, Discord, YouTube, and Clubhouse, but they have also increasingly worked to build

presence and change offline. Accordingly, this section argues that rather than solely existing in digital spaces, the community building that results from Guatemalan adoptee groups has worked to suture online and offline worlds.

Notably, both groups were started by founders with a desire for building community and visibility for those with lived experiences as transnational/racial adoptees from Guatemala. Gemma Givens, the founder of Next Generation Guatemala, describes its 2012 origins as coming from a moment of pain as a study abroad student in Guatemala and finding out that her birth mother had died before she had the opportunity to reunite with her. She told the *Berkeley News*, "I remember coming back home, sitting on my [adoptive] mom's couch thinking 'Is that it? Is that really it? That whole thing just happened, and there's no one to talk about it with?'" (Brice, 2019). NGG, then, was started as an outlet for Guatemalan adoptees to share their experiences with peers that may be able to understand them better than their adoptive families or non-adoptee friends. The founder shared her story on online message boards for adoptive parents in hopes that adoptees themselves would see her message. She googled search terms like "Guatemalan adoptees" and "adoptees from Guatemala" to try to find other adoptees to join her group. In other words, it was built out of what can be characterized as "flows of digital affect," or flows of adoptees seeking peers to share their adoption sentiments, leading to NGG's Facebook group (Döveling et al., 2018, p. 1). Indeed, for these first few years of the organization, Givens searched for digital traces leading to Guatemalan adoptees to add to her group, rather than adoptees finding the community themselves. It was not until 2015, three years after she created the group, that there was a steady flow of adoptees finding NGG on their own.

Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots was founded in November 2019 by five Guatemalan adoptees who had been a part of the NGG online community and saw an opportunity to reach for greater potential and organize around a central mission of giving back to and integrating with the country of Guatemala. Given that several of the founders had experience working with tech start-ups in the United States, Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots differentiates itself by treating their group in a similar fashion to a small business, which one of the founders told me means providing "concrete evidence of why it's within the best interest of the entities of the people we're reaching out to in Guatemala to give us some time." In other words, one of the goals of this group is to build partnerships with other adoptee organizations, as well as organizations and government entities in Guatemala that might give adoptees resources or tools for finding their identity.

Given their greater membership, the online spaces fostered by Next Generation Guatemala and Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots may more likely act as "affective publics" than Salvadoran groups and offer chances for adoptees to internally produce "disruptions/interruptions of dominant political narratives" around adoption by presenting underrepresented viewpoints (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 318). These contestations of the adoption-as-rescue paradigm focus on how adoption, searching for birth family, and maintaining a relationship with both birth and adoptive parents are complicated, particularly when there is language barrier. Adoptees use these groups to search for information or to share their own narratives. Moderators often announce new members who are given the opportunity to introduce themselves if they would like to and share their relationship to their adoption. These introductory posts can be constituted as "platform enabled" testimonio, in which previously "invisible conditions," such as being a transnational/racial adoptee can come to light (Rajabi, 2021, p. 6). Instead of having their emotions or affect filtered through adoptive parents or social workers, adoptees are free to discuss their adoption from their own perspective.

Collectively, these posts contribute to an affective public focused on recognizing and coming out of the fog. Rather than solely existing in digital spaces, however, the digital community building and increasing visibility of these groups has moved beyond the digital realm to create opportunities for change for adoptees in numerous aspects of their lived experiences.

A good example of this suturing work between online and offline contexts would be Adoptees with Guatemalan Root's partnership with the Confederacíon Deportiva Autónoma de Guatemala (CDAG) and the Federacíon Nacional de Fútbol (FEDEFUT) in Guatemala City. For this project, the Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots leadership team put together a digital presentation that they gave to other Guatemalan adoptee groups and adoptive parent networks to raise awareness that Guatemalan adoptees and their children were eligible to play for the Guatemalan National Teams. After putting together a pool of around 30–40 well-trained and talented adoptees who are soccer players aged 14–20, Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots presented this information to FEDEFUT, who had not thought to consider this potential group for talent. They have now built an established relationship, wherein Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots will help adoptees to meet with FEDEFUT scouts seeking new players.

This model of using online community building to construct change offline has also been successful in making the Guatemalan adoptee diaspora visible to government leaders. Leaders from Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots met with Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei in January 2021 to discuss the ways in which the Guatemalan government might aid adoptees in reconnecting with their roots and origins. To garner the attention and goodwill of Giammattei, the organization took the approach of proving the worth of the adoptee diaspora to encourage the government to work with them. One of the founders of Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots recalled letting the government know

> there's 50,000 of us, well educated; you know, we bring a unique set of skills and talents
> to the country . . . our [Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots] leadership team has experience
> in finance and running start-ups. We provided a very detailed list with dollar figures, with
> projections of how we think adoptees can impact a country, and that was just really well-
> received.

Indeed, within four months of their meeting, the Guatemalan Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriors had partnered with the Consejo Nacional de Adopciones (CNA) and Registro Nacional de los Personas (RENAP) to offer free services to adoptees of Guatemalan origins. According to Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots, this is significant because it is an official acknowledgment by the Guatemalan government of Guatemalan adoptees' birthright to citizenship. The CNA program aims to connect adoptees with birth families, but it is contingent on adoptees already having access to accurate adoption papers and records, which is not a given for all Guatemalan adoptees. Through RENAP, adoptees can request Guatemalan birth certificates, passports, and national identity cards, which can help them find birth relatives, as well as move to, live, and work in Guatemala (O'Dwyer, 2021).

Through this suturing of online community building and offline community action, Guatemalan adoptees have fought to find belonging and space in the United States, Guatemala, and in-between spaces of transnationalism that make up their worlds. Virtual communities allow adoptees to share connections

based on similar lived experiences and present opportunities to eradicate the fog through forging visibility that has enacted policy changes in Guatemala. Still, as Gray (2009) reminds us, "new media signal rather than create the fluidity between public and private [online spaces]" (p. 117). Put another way, the utopian virtues of online communities may not be fully translated offline. One of the central commonalities between NGG and Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots are their visions to connect Guatemalan adoptees and their fostering of an inclusive environment that meets all adoptees where they are in their adoption journey. For one of the leaders of NGG, that means that the "individual is at the center of the organization . . . everyone has a different motivation for reconnecting. So that's what we try to be aware of and sensitive to as we develop programming." As such, NGG's main goal is to provide positive connections among its group members. In a similar fashion, Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots seeks to provide community and opportunities to build friendships among their online-connected diaspora. Their programming is centered around identity and the idea that to find healing one must connect to their Guatemalan roots. In other words, both organizations have set up these digital spaces to meet the needs of the various individuals who take part in these communities. However, their focus on individual needs raises important questions about the distinctions between collective versus individual healing. Although the visibility of these groups might signal fluidity between online and offline acceptance, and collective and individual identity and healing, as I discuss later, this is not always the case.

Fog and Contestation in Online Community Building

Despite the utopian promises of digital community building, this study has found that there remain challenges to lifting the fog of international adoption trauma in online adoptee groups. The signaling, rather than direct creation, of a fluidity between online and offline is also illustrated by the obstacles that both groups face and contestation of viewpoints between group members. One of the greatest obstacles that NGG and Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots face is a transnational public that refuses to believe that an adoptee diaspora exists or accept that an unchecked system of international adoption could have resulted in tens of thousands of coerced adoptions and trafficked children. As one of the leaders of NGG emphasized, their actions are cognizant that the majority of the Guatemalan population is probably unaware of the number of out-of-country adoptions that took place between 1980 and 2008. If the casualties and Maya genocide that resulted from the Guatemalan Civil War are still not universally recognized, the generations of lost children are not either. They posited, "if you were to stop an average Guatemalan and ask them, 'What do you think about the generations that want to come back?' . . . They'd probably say like, 'Huh, who? What adoptees?" They further added, "because we all didn't go through the same agency, went through private lawyers, private notaries, hospitals, there isn't one conglomeration" or channel that Guatemalan adoptees went through and can be measured by. Likewise, speaking from experience, they noted that when they visit Guatemala, they often get questioned by locals: "Why would you want to come back?" In other words, there is a belief that adoptees live with an element of economic privilege in the United States unknown to the average Guatemalan. As such, NGG's actions are conscious of working within these parameters. Likewise, Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots strategies reflect a similar awareness of the need to maintain friendly ties with the government, public, and private entities with which they enter into partnership. Their tactic of bringing evidence of the value and worth of the adoptee diaspora to potential partners speaks to the practicality of their approach to community action that avoids taking accusatory tones in favor of forming pragmatic business deals. In October 2021, Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots

released a research report suggesting that the Guatemalan adoptee diaspora could end up holding the highest concentration of wealth among all Guatemalan citizens within the next 20 years. Based on the assumption that adoptees will inherit the wealth of their adoptive parents, the organization predicts the Guatemalan adoptee diaspora's net worth could be up to $42 billion. Their neoliberal approach speaks to the varying forms of violence Central American politics can and have taken, in which the Guatemalan government will only acknowledge the adoptee diaspora when there is monetary exchange involved. Put another way, the narratives that Guatemalan adoptees are telling through media and born from digital connection have become significant enough to be recognized by the Guatemalan state. Yet it is not a utopian ideal, and only certain adoptees willing to work through this neoliberal lens are benefitting. The private pain that drives adoptees to seek out online support groups is unacknowledged by greater publics with political power, such as the Guatemalan government. Can the fog of the international adoption system lift if the pain of state and political violence is not equally recognized? As such, the approach of both organizations has not gone without criticism from Guatemalan adoptees seeking more efficacious reconciliation efforts.

Indeed, for some adoptees, these groups do not have a critical or radical enough perspective toward the system of international adoption. As Guatemalan adoptee Kyle explains:

> I always knew that I wanted something different; I didn't want to just have tamale-making classes, you know, or language classes, or DNA service offerings through a third party, I don't know, I appreciate some of those things, but I also realized pretty quickly that I want people who are ready to build the system [of resistance] with me. And it's not the people in those groups, maybe a few of them, but I think the majority of people in both Next Gen and With Guatemalan Roots are really just looking for, really, yearning for community. And now that they've found some form of it, or some inkling of it, they have latched on and made it into something special for themselves, and that's good. I think they have made real community; it's just not exactly the community that I'm looking for. I'm looking for my collective, I'm looking to radicalize other adoptees, to pull them to the left, to pull them out of the fog.

In other words, for Kyle, it is important to be in community with those who have not just a shared origin but also a shared politics. His perspective also illustrates how the Guatemalan adoptee diaspora is not a monolith and has a range of political views on U.S.–Central American relations and the system of international adoption. For example, there are some Trump supporters in these groups, and as Kyle emphasized, he does not want to be in community with them. Rather, he has formed his own adoptee collective that is focused on the abolition of international adoption and securing reparations for the birth families of trafficked children. His group is made up of adoptees from several different regions and countries and rejects the national origin model of other groups to emphasize how similar principles of White saviorism and empire shaped international adoption globally. Regarding NGG and Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots, it is important to recognize that groups based in and/or built around affective publics may not result in the forms of collective action desired by all (see also Papacharissi, 2014, 2015). Kyle's case and desire to build a more radical transnational group of international adoption abolitionists offers an alternative case from which transnational/racial adoptees are working to eradicate the fog.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the complexity of Central American adoptee groups on Facebook. Through digital community building, Central American adoptees have constructed networks built in affect for transnational/racial adoptees from El Salvador and Guatemala to congregate, find belonging, and in some cases perform community action. Although Salvadoran adoptee diaspora groups have struggled to maintain active online participation, the digital spaces fostered by Next Generation Guatemala and Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots provide opportunities for adoptees to alleviate feelings of isolation. Their groups have also worked to create a fluidity between online and offline contexts to create visibility for a hidden diaspora that has had its history manipulated by the power of White saviorism discourses and made invisible by Central American and U.S. government leaders looking to downplay their perpetration of state violence.

Yet there are significant limitations within these digital diasporic communities. As discussed earlier, transnational/racial adoptees have used the phrase "coming out of the fog" to describe the process of an adoptee questioning the fog of colorblind politics, White saviorism, and imperialism. By recognizing Central American adoptees as their own knowledge producers, this study has used that phrase to discuss the complexity of transnational/racial adoptee identities and adoptee online community building. Social networks have the potential to allow adoptees to "come out of the fog," but this study has noted that adoptee groups online can also be contested spaces. Given the varying lived experiences of Central American adoptees, they do not have a monolithic view on the international adoption system and/or U.S.–Central American relations. This can be a hindrance to digital meaning making and community building turning into the community action desired by all. Still, social networking can be full of fleeting moments of identification, validation, and pedagogical possibilities for those who create and participate in online support groups. This may be more illustrative of the strengths of digital meaning making and online community building in making everyday transnational/racial adoptee lives more livable.

In closing, this study contributes to the literature on online community building, affective networks, and digital meaning making of trauma. Through tying these strands together, I have established how those who have faced invisible "symbolic traumas" (Rajabi, 2021), such as the forced emotional regulation of growing up as a transnational/racial adoptee in a household governed by colorblind politics, both make and at times fail to make meaning of affect through digital community building. Following Döveling and colleagues (2018), Papacharissi (2014, 2015), and others (Aziz, 2022; Wilding & Winarnita, 2022), this study also brings attention to the complicatedness of affect in digital spaces. It meaningfully adds to the conversation by demonstrating how digital affect informs both online and offline lived experiences and by establishing the contestatory possibilities of participating in digital communities built around emotional sentiment. Indeed, the concept of "coming out of the fog" of imperialism and White saviorism in relation to international adoption, can serve as a model from which to better understand the online community building and digital meaning making of other transnational youth diasporas that result from political and state violence. Still, this study is not without its limitations. Although both NGG and Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots boast nearly 1,000 members each, it is important to recognize that this is only a tiny fraction of the total Central American adoptee diaspora. As such, future research might consider or compare the emotional affects of both digitally active and nondigitally active transnational/racial adoptees, as well as consider the

role that generational differences and/or gender play in the dynamics of adoptee community building and cultural identity negotiation.

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