

A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia

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As Freud's privileged theory of unresolved grief, melancholia presents a compelling framework to conceptualize registers of loss and depression attendant to both psychic and material processes of Asian American immigration, assimilation, and racialization. Freud initially formulates melancholia as a pathological form of individual mourning for lost objects, places, or ideals. However, we propose a concept of melancholia as a depathologized structure of everyday group experience for Asian Americans. We analyze a number of Asian American cultural productions (literature and film) as well as two case histories of university students involving intergenerational conflicts and lost ideals of whiteness, Asianness, home, and language. Exploring these analyses against Klein's notions of lost objects, we propose a more refined theory of good and bad racialized objects. This theory raises the psychic and political difficulties of reinstatement and the mediation of the depressive position for Asian Americans. In addition, this theory suggests that processes of immigration, assimilation, and racialization are neither pathological nor permanent but involve the fluid negotiation between mourning and melancholia. Throughout this essay, we consider methods by which a more speculative approach to psychoanalytic theory and clinical practice might offer a deeper understanding of Asian American mental health issues.

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I wondered if whiteness were contagious. If it were, then surely I had caught it. I imagined this “condition” affected the way I walked, talked, dressed, danced, and at its most advanced stage, the way I looked at the world and at other people.

—Senna (1998), *Caucasia*

The “Condition” of Whiteness

CONFIGURING WHITENESS AS CONTAGION, BIRDIE LEE, THE NARRATOR of Danzy Senna’s (1998) *Caucasia*, connects assimilation to illness and disease. Separated from her African American activist father, Birdie and her blue-blooded mother flee from the law in a racialized and radicalized 1970s Boston. Eventually, the two take up residence in New Hampshire, where Birdie passes as “Jesse” and for white.¹ This assimilation into the whiteness of New Hampshire plagues Birdie, who wonders if “I had actually become Jesse, and it was this girl, this Birdie Lee who haunted these streets, searching for ghosts, who was the lie” (p. 329). This vexing “condition” of whiteness not only alters the narrator’s physical world—the manner in which Birdie walks, talks, dresses, and dances. Moreover, it configures the sphere of the affective—the ways in which Birdie ultimately apprehends the world and its occupants around her. Physically and psychically haunted, Birdie/Jesse feels “contaminated” (p. 329).

This is the condition of racial melancholia.

In Place of a Dialogue

This essay is the result of a series of sustained dialogues on racial melancholia that we recorded in the autumn and winter of 1998. We—a Chinese American male professor in the humanities and a Korean American female psychotherapist—transcribed, rewrote, and edited

¹ “Jesse” presents herself as Jewish (and thus not black), significantly complicating the racial complexities of “whiteness” in Senna’s novel. Although “Jesse” is marked differently from the WASPs populating her New Hampshire environment, her part-Jewish background is mobilized so that she can “pass.” It is ostensibly used as an explanation for her darker skin tone and hair.

these dialogues into their present form. However, we hope that our distinct disciplinary approaches to psychoanalysis—from literary theory as well as clinical practice—not only remain clear in this essay but also work to supplement each other. The pressing need to consider carefully methods by which a more speculative approach to psychoanalysis might enhance clinical applications, and vice versa, is urgent. This essay is, in part, a critical response to the disturbing patterns of depression that we have been witnessing in a significant and growing number of Asian American students with whom we interact on a regular basis. “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia” provides, then, an opportunity for us to propose several ways of addressing race in psychoanalysis, a topic largely neglected in this field.

As Freud’s privileged theory of unresolved grief, melancholia presents a compelling framework to conceptualize registers of loss and depression attendant to both psychic and material processes of assimilation.² Although Freud typically casts melancholia as pathological, we are more concerned with exploring this psychic condition as a depathologized structure of feeling. From this particular vantage, melancholia might be thought of as underpinning our everyday conflicts and struggles with experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization.³ Furthermore, even though melancholia is often conceived of in terms of individual loss and suffering, we are interested in addressing group identifications. As such, some of our observations bring together different minoritarian groups—people of color as well as gays and lesbians—from widely disparate historical, juridical, cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. We are wary of generalizing, but we also hope that, in forging theoretical links among these various minoritarian groups, we might develop new intellectual, clinical, and political coalitions.

²It is important to remember that melancholia and depression are not synonymous psychic conditions, although they often coexist and can trigger each other.

³The relationship between melancholia and processes of immigration, assimilation, and racialization is underdeveloped in both Asian American studies and clinical practice. We suggest that those interested in this intersection read Asian American literature by authors such as Chin (1988), Kingston (1976), Law-Yone (1983), Lee (1995), Ng (1993), Nieh (1981), and Yew (1997).

For a discussion of Asian American immigration, see Chan (1991), Hing (1993), and Lowe (1996). For a discussion of Asian American immigration and mental health issues, see Akhtar (1995) and Ying (1997).

This essay is framed by two larger questions: How might psychoanalytic theory and clinical practice be leveraged to think about not only sexual but also racial identifications? How might we focus on these crossings in psychoanalysis to discuss, in particular, processes of immigration, assimilation, and racialization underpinning the formation of Asian American subjectivity?

Assimilation as/and Melancholia

Freud's theory of melancholia provides a provocative model to consider how processes of assimilation work in the United States and how the depression that characterizes so much of our contemporary culture at the turn of this century might be thought about in relation to particularly marked social groups. In the United States today, assimilation into mainstream culture for people of color still means adopting a set of dominant norms and ideals—whiteness, heterosexuality, middle-class family values—often foreclosed to them. The loss of these norms—the reiterated loss of whiteness as an ideal, for example—establishes one melancholic framework for delineating assimilation and racialization processes in the United States precisely as a series of failed and unresolved integrations.

Let us return for a moment to Freud's (1917) essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," in which he attempts to draw a clear distinction between these two psychic states through the question of "successful" and "failed" resolutions to loss. Freud reminds us at the start of this essay that "[m]ourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition" (p. 243). Mourning, unlike melancholia, is a psychic process in which the loss of an object or ideal occasions the withdrawal of libido from that object or ideal. This withdrawal cannot be enacted at once; instead, it is a gradual letting go. Libido is detached bit by bit so that, eventually, the mourner is able to declare the object dead and to invest in new objects. In Freud's initial definition of the concept, melancholia is pathological precisely because it is a mourning without end. Interminable grief is the result of the melancholic's inability to resolve the various conflicts and ambivalences that the loss of the loved object

or ideal effects. In other words, the melancholic cannot “get over” this loss—cannot work out this loss in order to invest in new objects.

To the extent that ideals of whiteness for Asian Americans (and other groups of color) remain unattainable, processes of assimilation are suspended, conflicted, and unresolved. The irresolution of this process places the concept of assimilation within a melancholic framework. Put otherwise, mourning describes a finite process that might be reasonably aligned with the popular American myth of immigration, assimilation, and the melting pot for dominant white ethnic groups. In contrast, melancholia describes an unresolved process that might usefully describe the unstable immigration and suspended assimilation of Asian Americans into the national fabric. This suspended assimilation—this inability to blend into the “melting pot” of America—suggests that, for Asian Americans, ideals of whiteness are continually estranged. They remain at an unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal.

In configuring assimilation and melancholia in this particular manner, it is important to challenge Freud’s contention that melancholia ensues from a “pathological disposition”—that it emerges from the disturbance of a one-person psychology rather than the disruption of an intersubjective relationship. In our model, the inability to “get over” the lost ideal of whiteness, we must emphasize, is less individual than social. For instance, Asian Americans are typically seen by the mainstream as perpetual foreigners based on skin color and facial markings. Despite the fact that they may be U.S.-born or despite however long they may have resided here, Asian Americans are continually perceived as eccentric to the nation. At other times, Asian Americans are recognized as hyper “model minorities”—inhumanly productive—and hence pathological to the nation. In both scenarios, mainstream refusal to see Asian Americans as part and parcel of the American “melting pot” is less an individual failure to blend in with the whole than a socially determined interdiction. Indeed, Freud (1917) suggests in “Mourning and Melancholia” that melancholia may proceed from “environmental influences” (p. 243) rather than internal conditions that threaten the existence of the object or ideal.

Freud (1917) goes on to delineate the debilitating psychic consequences of melancholia. When faced with unresolved grief, he tells us, the melancholic preserves the lost object or ideal by incorporating it into the ego and establishing an ambivalent identification with it—ambivalent precisely because of the unresolved and conflicted nature of this forfeiture. From a slightly different

perspective, we might say that the melancholic makes every conceivable effort to retain the lost object, to keep it alive within the domain of the psyche. However, the tremendous costs of maintaining this ongoing relationship to the lost object or ideal are psychically damaging. Freud (1917) notes that the “distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (p. 244).

In identifying with the lost object, the melancholic is able to preserve it but only as a type of haunted, ghostly identification. That is, the melancholic assumes the emptiness of the lost object or ideal, identifies with this emptiness, and thus participates in his or her own self-denigration and ruination of self-esteem. Freud (1917) summarizes the distinction between mourning and melancholia in this oft-quoted remark: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (p. 246). He contends that melancholia is one of the most difficult of psychic conditions both to confront and to cure, as it is largely an unconscious process. “In yet other cases,” Freud observes,

one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of the kind occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him [p. 245].

Freud tells us that the depression often accompanying melancholia is extremely dangerous, characterized by the tendency to suicide (p. 252). Here, we must add, suicide may not merely be physical; it may also be a psychical erasure of one’s identity—racial, sexual, or gender identity, for example.

National Melancholia

For Asian Americans and other groups of color, suspended assimilation into mainstream culture not only may involve severe personal

consequences; ultimately, it also constitutes the foundation for a type of national melancholia, a national haunting, with negative social effects. In Senna's (1998) *Caucasia*, the ambivalence characterizing whiteness leaves the narrator with the constant and eerie feeling of "contamination."⁴ Writing about the nature of collective identifications, Freud notes in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921): "In a group every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest. This is an aptitude very contrary to his nature, and of which a man is scarcely capable, except when he makes part of a group" (p. 75). Our dialogue on racial melancholia insists on thinking what happens when the demand to sacrifice personal to collective interest is not accompanied by inclusion within—but exclusion by—the larger group

As we know, the formation of the U.S. nation quite literally entailed—and continues to entail—a history of institutionalized exclusions, from Japanese American internment to immigration exclusion acts legislated by Congress, brokered by the Executive, and upheld by the Judiciary against every Asian immigrant group.⁵ For example, from 1882 to 1943, Chinese Americans experienced one of the longest juridical histories of immigration exclusion as well as bars to naturalization and citizenship. Yet, few people realize that the first exclusion laws passed against a particular ethnic group were passed against the Chinese. These laws were followed by a series of further exclusion acts culminating in the 1924 National Origins Act and the Tyding-McDuffie Act of 1934, which effectively halted all Asian immigration and naturalization. At the same time, other laws were instituted against miscegenation and ownership of private property.

Discourses of American exceptionalism and democratic myths of liberty, individualism, and inclusion force a misremembering of these exclusions, an enforced psychic amnesia that can only return as a type of repetitive national haunting—a type of negative or absent presence (see Cheng, 1997, pp. 51–52). The popular model minority stereotype

⁴ Here, Senna is reconfiguring a long history of "contamination" that racializes individuals with "one drop" of "black blood" as colored. There is also a long history that configures immigrants as diseased and contaminated, carriers of illness that infect the national body politic. Contamination is thus one theme for thinking about the intersections of African American and Asian American racialization processes.

⁵ For a history of these immigration exclusion acts, see Chan (1991), Hing (1993), and Lowe (1996).

that clings to Asian Americans is both a product of—and productive of—this negative or absent presence.⁶ In its compulsive restaging, the model minority stereotype homogenizes widely disparate Asian and Asian American racial and ethnic groups by generalizing them all as economically or academically successful, with no personal or familial problems to speak of. In this manner, the stereotype works not only to deny the heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity of various Asian American groups that do not fit its ideals of model citizenry.⁷ Moreover, it also functions as a national tool that erases and manages the history of these institutionalized exclusions. The pervasiveness of the model minority stereotype in our contemporary vocabulary works, then, as a melancholic mechanism facilitating the erasure and loss of repressed Asian American histories and identities. These histories and identities can return only as a type of ghostly presence. In this sense, the Asian American model minority *subject* also endures in the United States as a melancholic national *object*—as a haunting specter to democratic ideals of inclusion that cannot quite “get over” the histories of these legislated proscriptions of loss.

Before moving on, we extend our observations on the psychic consequences that this model of national melancholia exacts on the individual Asian American psyche. One compelling example comes from Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* (1980). In Kingston’s historical novel, the narrator wildly speculates about the disappearance of the “Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains” after he helps to complete the transcontinental railroad, the greatest technological feat of the 19th century: “Maybe he hadn’t died in San Francisco, it was just his papers that burned; it was just that his existence was outlawed by Chinese Exclusion Acts. The family called him Fleaman. They did not understand his accomplishments as an American ancestor, a holding, homing ancestor of this place” (p. 151). Kingston understands that the law’s refusal to recognize Chinese Americans as citizens “outlaws” their existence, placing them under erasure. At the same time, she also underscores how this national refusal gains its efficacy through a simultaneous psychic internalization

⁶For a history of the model minority stereotype, see Suzuki (1977). For a critique of the model minority thesis in terms of Asian, white, and black relations, see Matsuda (1996).

⁷For an elaboration of the concepts of “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity,” see Lowe (1996, pp. 60–83).

of its interdicting imperatives on the part of excluded Asian American subjects. That is, the Grandfather's own family members refuse to recognize him. They cannot perceive his accomplishments building the railroad as legitimizing his membership in the American nation. How, in turn, can it be possible to see themselves as legitimate members of this society?

In this regard, racial melancholia might be described as splitting the Asian American psyche. This cleaving of the psyche might be productively thought about in terms of an altered, racialized model of classic Freudian fetishism.⁸ That is, assimilation into the national fabric demands a psychic splitting on the part of the Asian American subject who knows and does not know, at once, that she or he is part of the larger group. In the early 1970s, Asian American psychologists Stanley and Derald Sue (1971) coined the term "Marginal Man" to describe an Asian American subject who desires to assimilate into mainstream American society at any cost. The Marginal Man faithfully subscribes to the ideals of assimilation only through an elaborate self-denial of the daily acts of institutionalized racism directed against him. In "Chinese-American Personality and Mental Health," the Sues write about the complex psychological defenses that the Marginal Man must necessarily employ in order to "function" within American society. The Marginal Man finds it "difficult to admit widespread racism since to do so would be to say that he aspires to join a racist society" (p. 42). Caught in this untenable contradiction, the Marginal Man must necessarily become a split subject—one who exhibits a faithful allegiance to the universal norms of abstract equality and collective national membership at the same time that he displays an uncomfortable understanding of his utter disenfranchisement from these democratic ideals.

In Senna (1998), Birdie's unresolved assimilation into the whiteness of New Hampshire gives us a final reflection on the psychic effects of splitting in racial melancholia on the level of the signifier. Through the twinning of her name, the impossible mulatta child is marked by doubleness: Birdie (mulatto) → Jesse (white). Here, Birdie/Jesse is the object of melancholia for a nation organized by an ecology of whiteness. At the same time, she is the subject of melancholia—a girl

⁸ See Freud's essays, "Fetishism" (1927) and the "Splitting of the Ego in the Defensive Process" (1938). This argument on racial fetishization and the following discussion on the "Marginal Man" come from Eng (in press, chaps. 1, 4).

haunted by ghosts. It is difficult not to notice that much of contemporary ethnic literature in the United States is characterized by ghosts and by hauntings from both these perspectives—the objects and subjects of national melancholia. For instance, the subtitle of Kingston's well-known *The Woman Warrior* (1976) is *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," the Nobel laureate Toni Morrison (1989) writes that the African American presence is "the ghost in the machine" (p. 11).

Mimicry; or, the Melancholic Machine

Racial melancholia as psychic splitting and national dis-ease opens on the interconnected terrain of mimicry, ambivalence, and the stereotype. Homi Bhabha's (1984) seminal essay, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," is crucial here. Bhabha describes the ways in which a colonial regime impels the colonized subject to mimic Western ideals of whiteness. At the same time, this mimicry is also condemned to failure. Bhabha writes, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually reproduce its slippage, its excess, its difference. . . . *Almost the same but not white*" (pp. 126, 130). Bhabha locates and labels the social imperative to assimilate as the colonial structure of mimicry. He marks not only this social imperative but also its inevitable, built-in failure. This doubling of difference that is almost the same but not quite, almost the same but not white, results in ambivalence, which comes to define the failure of mimicry.

Here we connect Bhabha's observations on mimicry in the material space of the colonized with its transposition into the psychic domain through the logic of melancholia. It is important to remember that, as with Bhabha's analysis of mimicry, Freud marks ambivalence as one of melancholia's defining characteristics. In describing the genealogy of ambivalence in melancholia, Freud (1917) himself moves from the domain of the material to the register of the psychic. He notes that the "conflict due to ambivalence, which sometimes arises from real experiences, sometimes more from constitutional factors, must not be

overlooked among the preconditions of melancholia” (p. 251). Melancholia not only traces an internalized pathological identification with what was once an external and now lost ideal. In this moving from outside to inside (from Bhabha to Freud, as it were), we also get a strong sense of how social injunctions of mimicry configure individual psychic structures as split and dis-eased—another angle from which to consider the cleaving of the Marginal Man. The ambivalence that comes to define Freud’s concept of melancholia is one that finds its origins in the social, in colonial and racial structures impelling systems of mimicry and man.

It is crucial to extend Bhabha’s theories on colonial mimicry to domestic contexts of racialization in order to consider how we might usefully track this concept to explore further the material and psychic contours of racial melancholia for Asian Americans. One potential site of investigation is the stereotype. In an earlier essay entitled “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism,” Bhabha (1983) also aligns ambivalence and splitting with the stereotype, suggesting that the process of mimicry and the phenomenon of the stereotype might be considered together. The stereotype, Bhabha writes, “is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated . . . for it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency” (p. 66).

If we conceptualize the model minority myth as a privileged stereotype through which Asian Americans appear as subjects in the contemporary social domain, then we gain a more refined understanding of how mimicry specifically functions as a material practice in racial melancholia. That is, Asian Americans are forced to mimic the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society—in order *to be* at all. However, to the extent that this mimicry of the model minority stereotype functions only to estrange Asian Americans from mainstream norms and ideals (as well as from themselves), mimicry can operate only as a melancholic process. As both a social and a psychic malady, mimicry distances Asian Americans from the mimetic ideals of the nation. Through the mobilization and exploitation of the model minority stereotype, mimicry for Asian Americans is always a partial success as well as a partial failure to assimilate into regimes of whiteness.

Let us analyze this dynamic from yet another angle. Although Asian Americans are now largely thought of as model minorities living out the “American dream,” this stereotyped dream of material success is

partial because it is at most configured as economic achievement. The “success” of the model minority myth comes to mask our lack of political and cultural representation. It covers over our inability to gain “full” subjectivities, to be politicians, athletes, and activists, for example—to be recognized as “all American.” To occupy the model minority position, Asian American subjects must follow this prescribed model of economic integration and forfeit political representation as well as cultural voice. In other words, they must not contest the dominant order of things; they must not “rock the boat” or draw attention to themselves. It is difficult for Asian Americans to express any legitimate political, economic, or social needs, as the stereotype demands not only an enclosed but also a passive self-sufficiency.

From an academic point of view, the model minority stereotype also delineates Asian American students as academically successful but rarely “well-rounded”—“well-rounded” in tacit comparison to the unmarked (white) student body. Here is another example of Bhabha’s concept of mimicry as nearly successful imitation. This nearly successful assimilation attempts to cover over that gap—the failure of “well-roundedness”—as well as that unavoidable ambivalence resulting from this tacit comparison in which the Asian American student is seen as lacking. This material failure leads to a psychic ambivalence that works to characterize the colonized subject’s identifications with dominant ideals of whiteness as a pathological identification. This is an ambivalence that opens upon the landscape of melancholia and depression for many of the Asian American students with whom we come into contact on a regular basis. Those Asian Americans who do not fit into the model minority stereotype (and this is probably a majority of Asian American students) are altogether erased from—not seen in—mainstream society. Like Kingston’s grandfather in *China Men*, they are often rejected by their own families as well.⁹

The difficulty of negotiating this unwieldy stereotype is that, unlike most pejorative stereotypes of African Americans (but not unlike the myth of the black athlete), the model minority myth is considered to be a “positive” representation, an “exceptional” model for this

⁹T. Shibusawa (personal correspondence, December 8, 1999) points out that we must also consider how the model minority stereotype dovetails with a Confucian tradition within East Asian societies. This tradition mandates a strict hierarchical relationship between individual family members, and between individual family units and the political representatives of the state.

racialized group. In this regard, not only mainstream society but also Asian Americans themselves become attached to, and split by, its seemingly admirable qualities without recognizing its simultaneous liabilities—what Wendy Brown (1995) terms a “wounded attachment.”¹⁰ According to Bhabha, in its doubleness the stereotype, like mimicry, creates a gap embedded in an unrecognized structure of material and psychic ambivalence. In Gish Jen’s (1991) *Typical American*, for instance, we encounter Ralph Chang, who chases the American dream through his attempts to build a fried-chicken kingdom, the “Chicken Palace.” Eventually, the franchise fails, and the “a” falls off the “Chicken Palace” sign which becomes “Chicken P__lace.” This falling off is the linguistic corollary to the gap in the American dream that Ralph unsuccessfully attempts to mime. Perhaps it is in this gap—in this emptiness—that Freud’s theory of melancholia emerges and inhabits. It is in this gap—in this loss of whiteness—that the negotiation between mourning and melancholia is staged.

Mourning/Melancholia/Immigration

This structure of mimicry gestures to the partial success and partial failure to mourn our identifications with whiteness. Moreover, it gestures to our partial success and partial failure to mourn our identifications and affiliations with our “original” Asian cultures. Thus far, we have been focusing on the loss of whiteness as an ideal structuring the assimilation and racialization processes of Asian Americans. However, the lost object can be multifaceted. Since the reformation of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, there are more first-generation Asian American immigrants living in the United States today than any other generations of Asian Americans. A majority of Asian American college students are the offspring of this generation. Hence, many of our clinical observations lead us to a more concerted focus on the relationship of mourning and melancholia to questions of immigration and intergenerational losses involving Asian identity.

The experience of immigration itself is based on a structure of mourning. When one leaves one’s country of origin—voluntarily or

¹⁰ For an elaboration of this concept, see Brown (1995). In particular, see chapter 3, “Wounded Attachments” (pp. 52–76).

involuntarily—one must mourn a host of losses both concrete and abstract. These include homeland, family, language, identity, property, status in community—the list goes on. In Freud’s theory of mourning, one works through and finds closure to these losses by investing in new objects—in the American dream, for example. Our attention to the problematics of mimicry, ambivalence, and the stereotype, as well as our earlier analysis of the history of juridical exclusions of Asian Americans, reveals a social structure that prevents the immigrant from fully assimilating. From another perspective, it might be said to deny him or her the capacity to invest in new objects. The inability to invest in new objects, we must remember, is part of Freud’s definition of melancholia. Given our current discussion of the ways in which Asian American immigrants are foreclosed from fully assimilating, are they perpetually consigned to a melancholic status? If so, how do we begin to address Freud’s notion of melancholia as pathological? Clearly not all Asian American immigrants are confined to melancholic or depressive states. If this is the case, how do Asian American immigrants negotiate their losses? And how do their offsprings inherit and inhabit these losses?

If the losses suffered by first-generation immigrants are not resolved and mourned in the process of assimilation—if libido is not replenished by the investment in new objects, new communities, and new ideals—then the melancholia that ensues from this condition can be transferred to the second generation. At the same time, however, can the hope of assimilation and mastery of the American dream also be transferred? If so, mourning and melancholia are reenacted and lived out by the children in their own attempts to assimilate and to negotiate the American dream. Here, immigration and assimilation might be said to characterize a process involving not just mourning or melancholia but the intergenerational negotiation between mourning *and* melancholia. Configured as such, this notion begins to depathologize melancholia by situating it as the inherent unfolding and outcome of the mourning process that underwrites the losses of the immigration experience.

Let us turn to a clinical example. Elaine, a U.S.-born Korean American female college student, grew up in Texas. Her father is a professor, and her mother is a homemaker. An academic dean referred Elaine to Ms. Han because she was at risk of failing her first year in college. In a tearful presentation, Elaine reported, “My parents have sacrificed everything to raise me here. If my parents had stayed in Korea, my mom would be so much happier and not depressed. She

would have friends to speak Korean with, my father would be a famous professor, and we would be better off socially and economically. I wouldn't be so pressured to succeed. They sacrificed everything for me, and now it's up to me to please them, and to do well in school." When asked the reasons for her academic probation, she responded, "I didn't do well because at a certain point, I didn't care anymore, about myself or anything else."

Elaine's case is an illustration of an intergenerational transference between the immigrant parents and child, which might be usefully described through the logic of melancholia. The loss experienced by the parents' failure to achieve the American dream—to achieve a standard of living greater than what they could have putatively achieved in Korea—is a loss transferred onto and incorporated by Elaine for her to "work out" and to repair. In particular, Elaine reenacts these losses through her relationship with her mother. Elaine's depression is a result of internalized guilt and residual anger that she not only feels toward but also identifies with in her mother. Through this incorporation, she also functions as the placeholder of her mother's depression. This mother–daughter predicament has been widely debated in feminist circles (see, e.g., Kristeva, 1980). Here, the question is how racial difference comes to intersect what is a strongly gendered formation.

This crossing of sexual and racial difference is a narrative that is very common in Asian American literature (especially Asian American women's writing). Numerous stories portray the first generation (or, alternately, the second generation, depending on the particular historical moment and ethnic group) as being a lost generation—bereft, traumatized, with few material or psychic resources.¹¹ Is it, however, only at the moment in which the first generation acknowledges its

¹¹The question of generational sacrifice is historically as well as ethnically specific. For example, during the exclusion era, many first-generation Asian immigrants barred from naturalization and citizenship exhibited a strong identification with their home country as "sojourners." Consequently, it was the second generation during this historical period (especially those born on U.S. soil) who exhibited the stronger characteristics of a lost generation—for instance, the Nisei interned during World War II.

After the 1965 reformation of the Immigration and Nationality Act, Asian immigrants were legally guaranteed—and in much larger numbers—access to the space of the nation-state as citizens. The narrative of sacrifice thus attaches itself more strongly to these first-generation immigrants whose hope for assimilation and integration into the national fabric is more evident.

failure to achieve the American Dream that this theme of first-generation sacrifice then emerges to be retroactively projected onto the second generation? In other words, are Asian American parents as completely selfless as the theme of sacrifice suggests, or is this theme a compensatory gesture that attaches itself to the parents' losses and failures? Could the ambitions of Elaine's father to become a professor in an American university have motivated the family's immigration? Sacrifice, it is important to remember, is built on the assumption of nonequivalence and the melancholic notion that what is forfeited and lost can never be recuperated. In turn, do children of immigrants "repay" this sacrifice only by repeating and perpetuating its melancholic logic—by berating and sacrificing themselves?

Yet can sacrifice also be considered the displaced residue of hope—a hope for the reparation of melancholia, of the American dream? Can hope also be transferred from parent to child, and from child to parent? Elaine's case evokes Rea Tajiri's stunning video, *History and Memory* (1991). *History and Memory* is about a young Japanese American girl whose parents endure internment during World War II. Whereas the girl's mother has repressed all memories of the interment experience, the daughter has nightmares that she cannot explain—recurring images of a young woman at a watering well. The daughter is depressed, and the parents argue over the etiology of her depression. Eventually, the daughter discovers that these nightmares are reenactments of the mother's histories in camp. Ironically, the mother has history but no memory, while the daughter has memory but no history. For both mother and daughter, history and memory do not come together until the daughter visits the former site of the internment camp, Poston. There she realizes that it is her mother's history that she re-members.

Tajiri's video is a compelling example of the ways in which historical traumas of loss are passed down from one generation to another unconsciously. It illustrates Freud's maxim that the losses experienced in melancholia are often unconscious losses. Yet, at the same time, it also diverges from Freud's conception of the disease insofar as it posits a theory of melancholia that is not individual but that is inter-generationally shared among members of a social group, Japanese Americans. It also departs from Freud's definition of melancholia as pathology and permanence. Here, the hope for psychic health is stitched into the fabric of melancholia but only as an optative gesture that must be redeemed by subsequent generations. In contrast to Freud's contention that melancholia is a classic, one-person

psychology—a permanent psychic condition if not solved within a generation—Tajiri’s version of melancholia approaches this condition from a different perspective. It refines our theory of racial melancholia as a psychic state focused on bonds among people—an intersubjective psychology—that might be addressed and resolved across generations. Indeed, in *History and Memory* the daughter’s return to Poston initiates an incipient healing process in her mother.

In melancholia, the subject’s turning from outside (intersubjective) to inside (intrapsychic) threatens to render the social invisible. What is striking in both these examples, of Elaine and of *History and Memory*, is the manner in which the daughters’ bodies and voices become substitutes for those of the mothers—not just the mothers’ bodies and voices but also something that is unconsciously lost in them. To return to Freud (1917), the melancholic “knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him” (p. 245). Elaine’s narrative and the daughter’s nightmares are not their own histories. These daughters have absorbed and been saturated by their mothers’ losses. The mothers’ voices haunt the daughters. These losses and voices are melancholically displaced from the external world into the internal world of the psyche. The anger that these daughters feel toward the loved object is internalized as depression. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (1917) reminds us that the reproaches against the self are, in fact, displaced reproaches against the loved object that have been shifted onto the individual’s own ego (p. 248).

In this respect, melancholia might be said to trace a trajectory from love to hate of the lost object. This hate is subsequently transformed into self-hate in the course of moving from the outside world into the internalized domain of the psyche. As such, the internal monologue that the daughters direct toward themselves should rightly be an external dialogue between daughter and mother. In the *Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler (1997) writes,

The melancholic would have *said something*, if he or she could, but did not, and now believes in the sustaining power of the voice. Vainly, the melancholic now says what he or she would have said, addressed only to himself, as one who is already split off from himself, but whose power of self-address depends upon this self-forfeiture. The melancholic thus burrows in a direction opposite to that in which he might find a fresher trace of the lost other, attempting to resolve the loss through psychic substitutions and compounding the loss as he goes [p. 182].

This turning from outside to inside threatens to erase the *political* bases of melancholia. When Asian American students seek therapy, for example, their mental health issues—overwhelmingly perceived as intergenerational familial conflicts—are often diagnosed as being exclusively symptomatic of *cultural* (not political) conflicts. That is, by configuring Asian cultural difference as the source of all intergenerational dis-ease, Asian culture comes to serve as an alibi or a scapegoat for a panoply of mental health issues. These issues may in fact trace their etiology not to questions of Asian cultural difference but rather to forms of institutionalized racism and economic exploitation. The segregation of Asian American health issues into the domain of cultural difference thus covers over the need to investigate structural questions of social inequity as they circulate both inside and outside the therapeutic space of the clinic. For instance, not to recognize the history of Japanese internment when analyzing Tajiri's mother–daughter relationship serves not only to repress and to deny this history but also to redouble and to intensify the source of the daughter's melancholia.

Lisa Lowe (1996) writes in *Immigrant Acts*:

[I]nterpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians. The reduction of the cultural politics of racialized ethnic groups, like Asian Americans, to first-generation/second-generation struggles displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition. Such reductions contribute to the aestheticizing commodification of Asian American *cultural* differences, while denying the immigrant histories of material exclusion and differentiation [p. 63].

A therapeutic process that solely attributes cultural differences to intergenerational conflict may not only result in the failure to cure; it may also serve to endanger further the mental health of the Asian American patient.

Mourning/Melancholia/Language

This discussion on intergenerational immigration issues brings us to the corollary issue of language. Nelson, a first-generation Japanese

American student who immigrated from Osaka to New Jersey when he was five, sought therapy with Ms. Han, presenting chronic struggles with depression associated with identity conflicts regarding race. Nelson's family history reveals that he is the eldest child and has two siblings, a brother and a sister, both of whom were born in the United States. Before Nelson entered school, his mother spoke only Japanese to the children. When Nelson started kindergarten, his teacher strongly advised the mother to replace Japanese with English at home if she wanted her children to assimilate and to become successful students. Despite the mother's broken English, she followed the teacher's instruction assiduously, speaking only English to her children. Nelson recounts a story that took place later in grade school. During a reading lesson, he mispronounced "crooked" as "crookd" (one syllable). His teacher shamed him publicly for this failed mimicry and demanded to know where he learned to (mis)pronounce such a simple word. Nelson reluctantly replied that he learned this pronunciation from his mother. Nelson remembers, in particular, the social embarrassment and ridicule of his classmates.

What we learn about Nelson's case is that, although his original connection to the primary object (the mother) was through the Japanese language, this connection was abruptly interrupted by a foreign property, English. The mother's "poor" mimicry of English abandoned and revised the earliest mother-son attachment, one brokered in Japanese. As such, Nelson could no longer mirror himself from his mother, in Japanese or in English. This estrangement from language, native and foreign, is a double loss. Although acquiring a new language (English) should be perceived as a positive cognitive development, what is not often acknowledged or emphasized enough is the concomitant psychic trauma triggered by the loss of what had once been safe, nurturing, and familiar to the young child (Japanese).

The loss of Japanese as a safe and nurturing object reveals another concrete way to think about racial melancholia in relation to Asian American immigration and assimilation. In Nelson's case, melancholia results not only from a thwarted identification with a dominant ideal of unattainable whiteness but also a vexed relationship to a compromised Japaneseness. Nelson's analytic situation reveals how on two fronts ideals of whiteness and ideals of Asianness are lost and unresolved for the Asian American subject. In both instances, language is the privileged vehicle by which standards of successful assimilation and failed imitation are measured. In this sense, language itself might be thought of as a kind of stereotype, as demanding a flawless mimicry

on the part of the young Nelson, whose poor performance leads him to shame and self-abasement.

Nelson's transition from Japanese to English is another example of the negotiation between mourning *and* melancholia in the immigration and assimilation process. That is, although he suffers a loss and reevaluation of his "mother" tongue, his transition into the "adopted" language (or ideal) of English is anything but smooth. We need to emphasize that the shaming ritual to which the grade-school teacher subjects Nelson—one all too common in the Darwinian space of the classroom—is one that not merely makes his transition into English difficult but also demonizes the mother (the mother tongue and accent) at the same time. What was once a loved and safe object is retroactively transformed into an object of insecurity and shame. To the extent that the mother originally represented the safe notion of "home," Nelson's estrangement from his mother, and from his mother tongue, renders it *unheimlich*—unhomely, unfamiliar, uncanny.¹²

The relationship between language and assimilation into national citizenry is developed in a short story by Monique T.D. Truong (1991). "Kelly" is about a young Vietnamese refugee girl, Thuy-Mai, who finds herself in the improbable space of a 1975 North Carolina classroom. Truong's narrator writes a distressing epistolary monologue to her one and only (and now absent) friend from that dark period of her life, Kelly. In doing so, she mimes the melancholic logic discussed earlier. That is, an intersubjective external dialogue meant for two parties is melancholically internalized and transformed into an intrasubjective, interminable monologue of one remarkable for its anger and depressed solipsism. What is an epistolary, after all, than an impassioned (but not necessarily answered) plea to the other?

Truong's (1991) narrator recalls their grade-school teacher:

Kelly, remember how Mrs. Hammerick talked about Veteran's Day? How about the Day of Infamy when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor? Mrs. Hammerick, you know, the mayor's wife always had a sweet something surrounding her like she had spent too much time pulling taffy. . . . Kelly, you only knew that she liked the Beths and the Susans cause they wore pink and never bulged and buckled out of their shirt plackets. I was scared of

¹² See Freud's (1919) essay, "The Uncanny." For a discussion of the uncanny and nation building, see Wong (1993, chap. 2) and Wald (1995, chap. 1).

her like no dark corners could ever scare me. You have to know that all the while she was teaching us history she was telling, with her language for the deaf, blind, and dumb; she was telling all the boys in our class that I was Pearl and my last name was Harbor. They understood her like she was speaking French and their names were all Claude and Pierre [p. 42].

Truong's story expands our discussion of language and its effects on the constitution of good and bad national subjects. Here, Mrs. Hammerick's common language for the "deaf, blind, and dumb"—a language from which Thuy-Mai is emphatically excluded—is used to create good and bad students within the institutionalized space of the classroom. The Susans and the Beths, the Claudes and the Pierres, are all, as Louis Althusser (1971) would put it, "interpellated" by the mayor's wife as good citizen-subjects of the classroom and consequently the nation. Truong emphasizes how education is a primary site through which narratives of national group identity are established, reinforced, and normalized. At the same time, the Vietnamese refugee, Thuy-Mai, is pathologized as Asian enemy, dismissively labeled "Pearl Harbor," erroneously conflated with the Japanese, and implicitly rendered a menace to the coherence of the U.S. nation-state. Mrs. Hammerick is, of course, not literally speaking French. However, Truong's attention to language underscores the ways in which an unconscious discourse of racism is circulated in the space of the classroom as a nationalizing tract. Furthermore, as Lowe (1996) points out, Mrs. Hammerick's nationalizing tract is also a gendered discourse: "The narrator's observations that the teacher's history lesson addresses 'all the boys' further instantiates how the American nationalist narrative recognizes, recruits, and incorporates male subjects, while 'feminizing' and silencing the students who do not conform to that notion of patriotic subjectivity" (p. 55). Racialized subjects, such as Nelson and Thuy-Mai, become "good" citizens when they identify with the paternal state and accept, as Lowe summarizes, "the terms of this identification by subordinating [their] racial difference and denying [their] ties with the feminized and racialized 'motherland'" (p. 56).

On Good and Bad Racialized Objects

In the case of Nelson, the teacher's shaming of the mother brings her image into crisis, reconfiguring her return in the guise of a "bad"

mother. Like Elaine, Nelson, as the Asian American child of immigrant parents, becomes the arbiter of not only his mother's ambitions and losses but also his own. His attempts to "reinststate" his first love-object and caretaker (the Japanese mother) as well as his first language (Japanese) are torturous and compromised.

Nelson's case history brings us to the work of Melanie Klein on good and bad objects, which might be usefully factored into our discussion of racial melancholia for Asian Americans. In "Mourning and Manic-Depressive States" (1987), Klein extends Freud's theory on mourning:

[W]hile it is true that the characteristic feature of normal mourning is the individual's setting up the lost loved object inside himself, he is not doing so for the first time but, through the work of mourning, is reinstating that object as well as all his loved *internal* objects which he feels he has lost. He is therefore, *recovering* what he had already attained in childhood [pp. 165–166].

States of mourning in adult life are dealt with and resolved through the alignment of the lost object with all the "loved internal objects" of infancy. This clustering of the lost object with the good objects of the past is, as Klein points out, an attempt to recover and hence to reinststate the securities of infancy before the mother was split into good and bad (a necessary but impossible project). In this manner, the loved object is "preserved in safety inside oneself," and depression can be negotiated (p. 119).

Unlike Freud's theory, then, Klein's formulation for mourning as well as her prescription for psychic health, depends on the introjection of the lost object, on retaining it through a melancholic logic of internalization, but an internalization that attempts to reinststate the lost object by aligning it with a cluster of good internal objects.¹³ Klein warns, however, of the difficulties often accompanying this rebuilding of the inner world, this recovery and reinstatement of the lost object as "good." Depression will surely ensue, Klein warns, when the lost object cannot be clustered with the good objects of the past. In

¹³It might be useful here to consider Freud's notion of mourning and melancholia against Abraham and Torok's (1994) concept of "introjection" versus "incorporation."

particular, she writes about the advent of depression through the forfeiture of the “good” mother. In “The Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States,” Klein (1987a) observes that from

the very beginning of psychic development there is a constant correlation of real objects with those installed within the ego. It is for this reason that the anxiety I have just described manifests itself in a child’s exaggerated fixation to its mother or whoever looks after it. The absence of the mother arouses in the child anxiety lest it should be handed over to bad objects, external and internalized, either *because* of her death or because of her return in the guise of a “*bad*” mother [p. 121].

Nelson’s case illustrates what happens when the mother returns in the guise of a “bad” mother precisely through the loss—the death—of “Japaneseness.” Nelson’s “good” mother of infancy returns as a “bad” mother of childhood at the moment of the teacher’s sudden linguistic interdiction. After this childhood trauma, Nelson cannot easily repair and realign an image of the mother as “bad” with his earlier perceptions of this nurturing figure. Klein (1987a) summarizes:

In some patients who had turned away from their mother in dislike or hate, or used other mechanisms to get away from her, I have found that there existed in their minds nevertheless a beautiful picture of the mother, but one which was felt to be a *picture* of her only, not her real self. The real object was felt to be unattractive—really an injured, incurable and therefore dreaded person. The beautiful picture had been dissociated from the real object but had never been given up and played a great part in the specific ways of their sublimations [p. 125].

Nelson’s case history challenges us to consider what must be shorn away from the shamed Japanese mother in order to reinstate her to a world of loved internal objects, in order to create from her a “beautiful picture.” In this instance, it would seem that it is racial difference—Japaneseness itself—that must be dissociated from the figure of the injured and dreaded mother in order for this reinstatement to occur. In turn, however, through the shaming of his mother and mother tongue as well as his attempts to repair them, Nelson’s Japanese identity becomes dissociated from him, repressed into the unconscious and transformed into a bad object. Nelson’s case history emphatically

underscores the way in which good attachments to a primary object can be threatened and transformed into bad attachments *specifically through the axis of race*.

What we are proposing here is the refinement of Klein's theory into an account of "good" and "bad" *racialized* objects. Nelson and his mother are bound together as mourners. Nelson's mother becomes overwhelmed with guilt about her broken English. She transfers the burden of this trauma as well as the burden of hope onto Nelson's shoulders. As such, Nelson attempts to redeem himself by reinstating his mother (and thus his own ego) as good object. His fixation with perfecting his English is indicative of an obsessional mechanism that negotiates the depressive position for him. This process of perfecting English might be seen as Nelson's displaced attempt to preserve the image of the beautiful Japanese mother. Nelson's efforts to reinstate an image of beauty can never be fulfilled (for him or anyone). However, these attempts are a "necessary failure," for Klein warns that if this image of beauty is removed completely—if the death wish against the mother is fulfilled—then guilt is not reduced but is in fact heightened. Were this to happen, the self-abasement accompanying melancholia's guilt and ambivalence would only redouble and intensify.

Indeed, the racial melancholia that underwrites Nelson's unresolved loss of the Japanese mother renders the attempt itself to reinstate extraordinarily tenuous. This compromising of Nelson's efforts vexes the "proper" work of mourning, leaving him depressed. Klein (1987a) states, "[T]he ego endeavours to keep the good apart from the bad, and the real from the phantasmatic objects" (p. 123). However, it may be that the racial melancholia and depression that ensue for Nelson can be avoided only through the most difficult psychic process of dissociation—splitting off Japaneseness from the figure of the mother as well as segregating racial and sexual difference. Klein (1987a) comments, "The attempts to save the loved object, to repair and restore it, attempts which in the state of depression are coupled with despair, since the ego doubts its capacity to achieve this restoration, are determining factors for all sublimations and the whole of the ego development" (p. 124). Nelson's chronic depression and sustained ambivalence toward the figure of his mother indicate the torturous process of reinstatement that clearly impedes proper ego development. It is racial difference that must be attended to here.

At this point, we return to Butler. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler (1997) observes that melancholia instantiates a psychic topography

in which the ego constitutively emerges in relation to a superego that admonishes and judges it to be lacking. Melancholia, Butler states, “produces the possibility for the representation of psychic life” (p. 177). She makes this claim through a deconstruction of mourning and melancholia. In his first account of the disease, Freud (1917) contrasts the pathological condition of melancholia to the normal work of mourning. Later, in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1923) revises this earlier distinction between mourning and melancholia. He reconceptualizes it, Butler notes, when he realizes that the ego itself is comprised of abandoned object-cathexes internalized as constitutive identifications: “But let us remember that in *The Ego and the Id* Freud himself acknowledges that melancholy, the unfinished process of grieving, is central to the formation of identifications that form the ego. Indeed, identifications formed from unfinished grief are the modes in which the lost object is incorporated and phantasmatically preserved in and as the ego” (Butler, 1997, p. 132). If the ego is composed of its lost attachments, then there would be no ego—indeed, no distinction between inside and outside—without the internalization of loss along melancholic lines. Melancholia thus instantiates the very logic by which the ego and its psychic landscape are constituted. It is only after this partition of internal and external worlds that the work of mourning—that subjectivity itself—becomes possible.¹⁴

Butler aligns this deconstruction of mourning and melancholia with the social emergence of gender and a system of compulsory heterosexuality. She focuses on Freud’s contention, in *The Ego and the Id*, that the primary lost object of desire for the little boy is the father. As such, Butler argues that heterosexual male subjectivity is created melancholically through the father’s forfeiture as an object of

¹⁴ Butler (1997) writes that, in melancholia, the “inability to declare such a loss signifies the ‘retraction’ or ‘absorption’ of the loss by the ego. Clearly, the ego does not literally take an object inside itself, as if the ego were a kind a shelter prior to its melancholy. The psychological discourses and its various ‘parts’ miss the crucial point that melancholy is precisely what interiorizes the psyche, that is, makes it possible to refer to the psyche through such topographical tropes. The turn from object to ego is the movement that makes the distinction between them possible, that marks the division, the separation or loss, that forms the ego to begin with. In this sense, the turn from the object to the ego fails successfully to substitute the latter for the former, but does succeed in marking and perpetuating the partition between the two. The turn thus produces the divide between ego and object, the internal and external worlds that it appears to presume” (p. 170).

desire and his internalization as a primary and constitutive identification. She writes that heterosexual identity is thus

purchased through a melancholic incorporation of the love that it disavows: the man who insists upon the coherence of his heterosexuality will claim that he never loved another man, and hence never lost another man. That love, that attachment becomes subject to a double disavowal, a never having loved, and a never having lost. This “never-never” thus founds the heterosexual subject, as it were; it is an identity based upon the refusal to avow an attachment and, hence, the refusal to grieve [Butler, 1997, pp. 139–140].

Butler concludes that in opposition to a conception of (hetero)-sexuality, which is said to reflect a natural gendered order, gender in this case is understood to be composed of precisely what remains melancholically disavowed in sexuality.

Klein’s theory of good and bad objects is a useful theoretical supplement here because she addresses something left unaddressed by Butler. If a system of gender melancholy instantiates compulsory male heterosexuality, we nevertheless do not typically describe the normative male subject as melancholic or depressed. In other words, as Adam Phillips (1997) suggests, if the normative heterosexual white male claims to be relatively untroubled by this disavowal, is it the task of the psychoanalyst to engineer its undoing (p. 155)? Here, the clinical implications of this undoing diverge from the speculative payoff of rethinking a system of compulsory heterosexuality.

In both cases, however, Klein’s notion of the good and the bad object—of “recovery” and “reinstatement”—allows us to understand how certain losses are grieved because they are not, perhaps, even seen as losses but as social gains. These gains include access to political, economic, and cultural privilege; alignment with whiteness and the nation; and “full” subjectivity and a sense of belonging. In other words, the loss of the father as object of desire for the little boy can be more acceptably mourned than other losses, for this “forfeiture” has widespread social support and approbation. Indeed, it provides the very foundation of oedipalization. As such, this “forfeiture” is not seen as an abandonment but as a culturally rewarded transaction. To return to Phillips, we must continue to ask why it is that the normative heterosexual white male can claim to be untroubled by his melancholic disavowals.

Let us contrast this normative story of oedipalization and the “loss” of the father to Nelson’s compromised loss of the mother and mother tongue. Our present deconstruction of mourning and melancholia tells us that it is crucial to recognize that all identities are built on loss. Loss is symptomatic of ego formation, for both dominant as well as marginalized subjects. The crucial point to investigate, then, is the social and psychic status of that lost object—idealized or devalued—and the ways in which that lost object can or cannot be reinstated into the psychic life of the individual in order to rebuild an internal world. It is Klein who lends us a theoretical account to make these distinctions.

Depathologizing Melancholia

The process of assimilation is a negotiation between mourning *and* melancholia. The ethnic subject does not inhabit one or the other—mourning or melancholia—but mourning *and* melancholia coexist at once in the process of assimilation. This continuum between mourning and melancholia allows us to understand the negotiation of racial melancholia as *conflict* rather than *damage*. Indeed, might we consider damage the intrasubjective displacement of a necessarily intersubjective dynamic of conflict? This attention to racial melancholia as conflict rather than damage not only renders it a productive category but also removes Asian Americans from the position of solipsistic “victims.” We are dissatisfied with the assumption that minoritarian subjectivities are permanently damaged—forever injured and incapable of ever being “whole.” Our theory of intersubjective conflict—intergenerationally shared—evokes Klein’s notion of rebuilding on a communal level. This notion of communal rebuilding provides the foundation for the reparation of individual psyches as well as group identities.

Our discussion of immigration, assimilation, and racialization pursued here develops them as issues involving the fluid negotiation between mourning and melancholia. In this manner, melancholia is neither pathological nor permanent but, as José Esteban Muñoz (1999), following Raymond Williams, eloquently suggests, “a structure of feeling,” a structure of everyday life. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), Muñoz states that, for queers as well as for people of color, melancholia is not a pathology but an integral part of daily existence and survival. He provides a

corrective to Freud's vision of melancholia as a destructive force and states that it is instead part of the

process of dealing with all the catastrophes that occur in the lives of people of color, lesbians, and gay men. I have proposed a different understanding of melancholia that does not see it as a pathology or as a self-absorbed mood that inhibits activism. Rather, it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names [p. 74].

Within the continuum of mourning and melancholia is a productive gap inhabited by the various issues under discussion here—immigration, assimilation, and racialization; mimicry, ambivalence, and the stereotype; sacrifice, loss, and reinstatement. The material and psychic negotiations of these various issues are the conflicts with which Asian Americans struggle on an everyday basis. This struggle does not necessarily result in damage but is finally a productive and a necessary process. It is the work of rebuilding. "Suffering," Klein (1987b) offers, "can become productive" (p. 163):

It seems that every advance in the process of mourning results in a deepening in the individual's relation to his inner objects, in the happiness of regaining them after they were felt to be lost ("Paradise Lost and Regained"), in an increased trust in them and love for them because they proved to be good and helpful after all. This is similar to the way in which the young child step by step builds up his experiences but also from the ways in which he overcomes frustrations and unpleasant experiences, nevertheless retaining his good objects (externally and internally) [p. 164].

We would like to think about the numerous difficulties of Asian American immigration, assimilation, and racialization processes in terms of "Paradise Lost and Regained."

In the work of racial melancholia, there too lies a nascent ethical and political project. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud (1917) originally describes the melancholic's inability to "get over" loss in rather negative terms. We instead focus on the melancholic's absolute refusal to relinquish the other—to forfeit alterity—at any costs. In his essay, Freud lays out the provocative idea that in melancholia "the

shadow of the object fell upon the ego” (p. 249). In most of the Freudian oeuvre, it is indubitably the ego that holds sway; his majesty the ego’s narcissism reigns supreme. Throughout his writings, Jacques Lacan (1991), even more, emphasizes the narcissism of the ego, reversing this particular formulation by insisting that it is always the shadow of the ego that falls on the object. In this present formulation, however, we have the loved object, not the ego, holding sway. Racial melancholia thus delineates one psychic process in which the loved object is so overwhelmingly important to and beloved by the ego that the ego is willing to preserve it even at the cost of its own self. In the transference aspects of melancholic identifications, Freud (1917) suggests, “is the expression of there being something in common which may signify love” (p. 250).

This community of love—as W.R.D. Fairbairn (1954), Jessica Benjamin (1998), Christopher Bollas (1987), and others have noted—is possible only through the aggressive and militant preservation of the loved and lost object. Hence, the melancholic process is one way in which socially disparaged objects—racially and sexually deprived others—live on in the psychic realm. This behavior, Freud (1917) remarks, proceeds from an attitude of “revolt” (p. 248) on the part of the ego. It displays the ego’s melancholic yet militant refusal to allow certain objects to disappear into oblivion. In this way, Freud tells us, “love escapes extinction” (p. 257). This preservation of the threatened object might be seen, then, as a type of ethical hold on the part of the melancholic ego. The mourner, in contrast, has no such ethics. The mourner is perfectly content to kill off the lost object, to declare it to be dead yet again within the domain of the psyche.

While the ambivalence, anger, and rage that characterizes this preservation of the lost object threaten the ego’s stability, we do not imagine that this threat is the result of some ontological tendency on the part of the melancholic; it is a *social* threat. Ambivalence, rage, and anger are the internalized refractions of an ecology of whiteness bent on the obliteration of cherished minoritarian subjectivities. If the loved object is not going to live out there, the melancholic emphatically avers, then it is going to live here inside of me. Along with Freud (1917), “we only wonder why a man has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind” (p. 246). It is the melancholic who helps us come face-to-face with this social truth. It is the melancholic who teaches us that “in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill” (Freud, 1914, p. 85).

Both Butler (1997) and Douglas Crimp (1989) isolate the call of melancholia in the age of AIDS as one in which the loss of a public language to mourn a seemingly endless series of young male deaths triggers the absolute need to think about melancholia and activism. Muñoz (1999) highlights the communal nature of this activist project—the community-oriented aspect of group rather than individual losses, of group rather than individual identifications, and of group rather than individual activism. “Communal mourning, by its very nature, is an immensely complicated text to read, for we do not mourn just one lost object or other, but we also mourn as a ‘whole’—or, put another way, as a contingent and temporary collection of fragments that is experiencing a loss of its parts” (p. 73). A series of unresolved fragments, we come together as a contingent whole. We gain social recognition in the face of this communal loss.

There is a militant refusal on the part of the ego—better yet, a series of egos—to let go, and this militant refusal is at the heart of melancholia’s productive political potentials. Paradoxically, in this instance, the ego’s death drive may be the very precondition for survival, the beginning of a strategy for living and for living on. Butler (1997) asks of melancholia: “Is the psychic violence of conscience not a refracted indictment of the social forms that have made certain kinds of losses ungrievable?” (p. 185). And Crimp (1989) ends his essay, “Mourning and Militancy,” with this simple and moving call: “Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning *and* militancy” (p. 18). We pause here to insert yet another permutation of this political project in relation to the Asian American immigration, assimilation, and racialization processes we have been discussing throughout this essay: mourning *and* melancholia.

Epilogue/Living Melancholia

This essay is an engagement with psychoanalysis and racial difference that belongs neither in the speculative nor in the clinical arena proper. Rather, this essay, like our theory of racial melancholia, exists in a gap between two spheres and seeks to establish a productive relationship between them. We wrote this essay with the hope of proffering a number of new critical interventions significant to both realms and with the desire to understand better our students, our communities, ourselves.

It also occurs to us that our dialogue—crossing into the often disparate realms of the literary and the clinical—is an exercise in new models of communal interaction that we advocate in our various discussions on the everyday living out of racial melancholia by Asian Americans. Much of this essay reexamines the ways in which the genealogy of racial melancholia as individual pathology functions in terms of larger social group identities—as a type of “psychic citizenship.” Indeed, it is our belief that the refusal to view identities under social erasure as individual pathology and permanent damage lies in the communal appropriation of melancholia, its refunctioning as a structure of everyday life that annuls the multitude of losses an unforgiving social world continually demands.

Toward that end, we conclude with a few words on one strategy of community building within the space of the university. A recent, albeit contested, trend in the academy is the establishing of Asian American studies programs. In the face of this trend, the model minority stereotype is consistently marshaled by university administrations as proof that Asian Americans neither are in want of any special recognition nor have any particular needs as a distinct and socially marked group. The popular vision of Asian Americans as model minorities, as having the best of both worlds (two cultures, two languages), is a multicultural fantasy in the age of diversity management. Our investigation here of immigration, assimilation, and racialization as conflicted and unresolved processes of mourning and melancholia reveals the link between East and West as less than fluid. For Asian Americans, the reparation of these unresolved processes requires a public language. It requires a public space in which these conflicts can be acknowledged and negotiated.

In their ideal form, Asian American studies programs provide this publicity, a physical and psychic space to bring together various fragmented parts (intellectual, social, political, cultural) to compose, borrowing from Winnicott (1965), a “holding environment,” a “whole” environment. This type of public space ultimately facilitates the creation of new representations of Asian Americans emerging from that gap of ambivalence between mourning and melancholia. These new representations not only contest the conventional ways in which Asian Americans have been apprehended but also refunction the very meanings of “Asian American” within the public sphere.

In the final analysis, this essay has been an exercise for us to mourn the various passings of Asian American students who no longer felt tied to our present world, such as it is. However, this dialogue—this

production of new ideas about the conditions and constraints of racial melancholia—should not be taken as a summary moment. Instead, it might be understood as only an initial engagement in the continued work of mourning and melancholia, and the rebuilding of new communities.

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