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BOOK REVIEW

***Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*, by Eng, D. L., & Han, S. (2018). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.**

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Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans is the culmination of a research partnership that has been continuously growing and evolving over the past 20 years. Queer theorist David Eng and psychotherapist Shinhee Han work through and develop two psychic mechanisms that also bear the namesake of the book: “racial melancholia” and “racial dissociation.” The former refers to “histories of racial loss that are condensed into a forfeited object whose significance must be deciphered and unraveled for its social meanings” (p. 1). Eng and Han primarily theorize racial melancholia in relation to case studies of second-generation Asian American immigrants—a group they term Generation X—who immigrated to the Americas in the wake of the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement. “Racial dissociation” refers to “histories of racial loss that are dispersed across a wide social terrain, histories whose social origins and implications remain insistently diffuse and obscure” (p. 1). Eng and Han theorize racial dissociation in relation to case studies of first-generation Asian American immigrants and millennials—a group they term Generation Y—who are coming to age in an era of political colour-blindness and neoliberal globalization. The main argument of this book is to suggest that these two psychic mechanisms are two of the ways in which Asian Americans work through experiences of discrimination, loss, and grief. Doing so, the authors suggest, allows for a fuller consideration of the implications of legacies of immigration, assimilation, racism, and colonialism on the formation of a racial subject and the subject of racial history.

To parse the particularities of their argument, the authors move through two theoretical registers: psychoanalysis and critical race studies. Psychoanalysis, the authors suggest, has a tendency to avoid engaging in matters of race, which is often seen as a sociological phenomenon and not relevant to theories of psychoanalysis. The main tension here is that psychoanalysis primarily deals with the inner world of the psyche over the external social

world. Such a reticence on the part of psychoanalysis has meant that the field has been slow to recognize how psychoanalysis itself is shaped by legacies of racism and colonialism. Critical race theory, on the other hand, tends to privilege the materiality of race over a consideration for the psychic mechanisms involved in the formation of a racial subjectivity. The authors suggest that the focus on materiality is the result of a focus on group-based discrimination, which results in less of a focus on individual subjectivity.

Folding psychoanalysis and critical race theory into a workable analytic framework is a difficult task, and the authors do excellent work in bringing a sense of urgency to the development of a paradigm that can tackle both the inner machinations of the psychic world and the constantly shifting social terrain. Critically, identification and the development of subjectivity is based on attachments to the other vis-à-vis social categories, identities, collectivities, etc. Therefore, Eng and Han argue, there must be a consideration for the psychic mechanisms engaged in the play between the individual and the collective. The use of psychoanalysis and critical race theory mirrors this commitment of engaging in the play of the individual and collective by moving from Freudian theories of desire and repression that characterize much of the thinking about intrapsychic phenomenon, to Kleinian and Winnicottian theories of relation and attachment that characterize much of the thinking about interpsychic phenomenon.

For example, in Chapter Two, “Desegregating Love: Transnational Adoption, Racial Reparation, and Racial Transitional Objects,” the authors recognize the limits of their initial musings on Freud’s concepts of mourning and melancholia, suggesting the need for the incorporation of Kleinian theories of infantile development and Winnicottian notions of transitional objects to properly theorize the psychic predicaments of transnational adoptees. As they argue, “transnational adoption involves the intersection of two very powerful origin myths—the return to mother and to motherland” (p. 67). Klein’s theoretical objects, like the good mother and bad mother, become thought of as racialized positions in order to think about race; this is constitutive of Klein’s understanding of infantile development. Winnicott’s transitional object becomes thought of as a racial transitional object in order to think about the psychic processes of “creating room” (p. 68) between the racialized birth mother and the white adoptive mother. The extension of theory here is powerful because not only does it offer useful (re)readings of psychoanalytic paradigms through a critical race studies lens, but it also uses the implementation of case histories that demonstrate the political and therapeutic urgency for these (re)readings. For Mina, one of Dr. Han’s clients and a transnational adoptee from Korea, the extension of theory here allows for the argument that “psychic health and stability, therefore, would entail a reparative position for race accounting for the psychic

possibility of two ‘good enough’ racialized mothers—not the white *or* Korean mother but the white *and* Korean mother” (p. 82).

Part 1 of the book, *Racial Melancholia*, begins by illustrating the development of melancholia from Freud to Klein to demonstrate the play between the individual and the collective. Freud’s early theorizations of melancholia focus on the interpsychic mechanisms in the individuals that occur during mourning that may coalesce into melancholia. Klein’s development of melancholia, on the other hand, focuses more on the relational aspects of melancholia as evidenced by her founding of what would later be known as a distinct thread of psychoanalytic thought: Object Relations. Part 2 of the book, *Racial Dissociation*, starts with an illustration of the intrapsychic mechanisms of dissociation, and moves to an engagement with the relational aspects of dissociation. Doing so allows the authors to argue that the current political milieu has created a collective state of racial dissociation that extends beyond the lives of Asian Americans and into the fabric of how racial subjectivity is thought about in terms of Asian American identity.

While Eng and Han centre their work on Asian Americans, they also critically unpack what sorts of stereotypes get folded into this sort of identity. For example, they argue that “[Asian Americans] are seen as a homogenous and self-sufficient community in no particular need of assistance or support” (p. 3). This framing allows for an exploration of how the mechanisms of racial melancholia and racial dissociation have fostered an environment wherein Asian Americans are seen as a monolithic and independent entity. These theoretical paradigms, in combining psychoanalysis and critical race theory, allow for a critical engagement with the legacies of immigration and assimilation that have created the conditions in which this sort of racial subjectivity is developed. Such an engagement allows for a more thorough understanding of the play between individual and collective. Further, it also allows for a conceptualization of race *as a relation*, as opposed to a material object. Thinking about race as a relation, alongside the authors suggestion of thinking about whiteness as property, allows the authors to develop their theories of racial melancholia and racial dissociation in a coterminous way while at the same time acknowledging the unique temporalities of each.

Although the engagements with Freud, Klein, and Winnicott are substantial, there is a lack of engagement with other analysts that might produce generative conversations. This is not so much a critique as a recognition that the analyses that the authors present offer opportunities for further engagement. For example, thinking about race *as a relation* might offer interesting insights into thinking about the relationship between the Lacanian theory of the three registers of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. Alternatively, Wilfred Bion’s

extensive writing on dreaming might offer a unique perspective on the dreams of transnational adoptees in relation to the myths of the return to the mother and the return to the motherland.

Accessibly written and powerfully argued, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* is an excellent resource for any scholar thinking about race and psychoanalysis and, specifically, who are thinking critically about the use of psychoanalytic paradigms like mourning, loss, melancholia, infantile development, reparation, or transitional objects in relation to questions of the lived experiences of racial oppression. The most powerful aspect of this book is the combination of both theoretical and clinical work. The development of psychoanalytic theory is dependent upon the interactions between analyst and analysand in the clinic. To clarify, the development of the theory emerges from the practice of psychoanalysis and this clinical work is not something that can be replicated in a one-to-one manner outside of the clinic. The lack of a consideration of race in the field of psychoanalysis, as Eng and Han note, has, therefore, made the development of psychoanalytic theories of race difficult. This text provides a crucial entry point for thinking about race both in and outside of the clinic.

References

Eng, D. L., & Han, S. (2018). *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.