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## **Review of Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans**

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*, by David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019, 232 pp., \$29.95

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Eng and Han's most recent collaboration, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*, begins to chart the largely unmapped territory of Asian American experiences and psychoanalysis. Eng, a male Chinese American humanities professor, and Han, a female Korean American psychotherapist, have demonstrated their commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship during their fruitful 20-year partnership. This latest installment opens up exciting possibilities for the intersections between critical race theory, psychoanalysis (both clinical and discursive), and Asian American subjectivities.

This reworking of four papers is a supple example of reflexivity, positionality, and relationality that offers refreshing new perspectives on foundational concepts of psychoanalytic theory. The book nuances overwrought tropes of Asian American experiences (e.g., the model minority myth and intergenerational narratives of sacrifice for the American dream), and gives voice to different kinds of pain that these narratives otherwise run the risk of concealing.

In considering race as relation, Eng and Han think of "race as a verb, race as historical processes of *racialization*" and as *dynamic* (p. 12). For Asian Americans in particular, some of the predominant related themes include: intergenerational conflict; visibility; language; achievement; unmoored loss and ghosts; and the confusion between stereotype and identity (via mimicry). These thematic preoccupations stand in relationship to other aspects that influence Asian American subjectivities, such as immigration status, various kinds of privilege or disadvantage, adoption status, gender, sexuality, and personal family dynamics, to name a few.

With respect to Whiteness as property, Eng and Han, drawing on Harris's (1993) work, explore the idea that the main characteristic of Whiteness over time has been and continues to be the right to exclude. Specifically in relation to Asian American racialization, Eng and Han incorporate citizenship as a part of this definition of Whiteness and explore how Asian Americans as a racial group have been (spuriously) presumed to carry some of the privileges of Whiteness (e.g., high socioeconomic status, lack of racial discrimination) while at the same time, excluded from "full participation and belonging in US culture" because of immutable visual difference (p. 17).

In acknowledging the historically invisible effects of Asian American *racialization*, Eng and Han manage to avoid overculturalized explanations of Asian Americans and an overdrawn East-West dichotomy that have characterized some of the scant perspectives on Asian Americans in psychoanalysis (e.g., Kozuki & Kennedy, 2004; Layton, 2006; Roland, 2006). Simply by virtue of being Asian Americans and psychoanalytically oriented themselves, Eng and Han begin to correct the imbalance in the field where Asian Americans are more often being written about as collective Other, rather than as individual selves.


Apart from its social significance, the merits of the work are considerable. As the title suggests, the book is bifurcated between racial melancholia and racial dissociation, the "two psychic mechanisms by which racialized immigrant subjects process problems of discrimination, exclusion, loss, and grief" (p. 2). They also attend to how these processes manifest historically among second-generation Asian Americans of Generation X and first-generation Asian immigrant parachute children of Generation Y, respectively. Eng and Han rely on braided clinical material, sociohistorical commentary, and examples from literature to enliven and personalize these concepts.

Using Freud as a starting point, the first chapter "Racial Melancholia: Model Minorities, Depression, and Suicide" is a revised version of Eng and Han's (2000) article, which has long stood out to me as one of a handful of articles in the psychoanalytic literature written about Asian Americans by Asian Americans (see Yi, 1998 and Akhtar, 1995 for other examples).

Dating back to the 1960s, the model minority stereotype (often referred to as "the model minority myth") is a widely popularized idea that Asian Americans are a hard-nosed, docile group of people whose diligence, frugality, and sacrifice has led them to high economic and educational attainment and thus, achievement of the American dream. Corollaries of the myth include the implications that Asian Americans exhibit low crime rates, have few psychological needs, are apolitical, and are "honorary Whites" (Kawai, 2005; Takaki, 1989; Tuan, 1998; Wu, 2002).

Eng and Han diligently deconstruct the myth of Asian Americans being a "model minority" group by citing statistics about how many Asian Americans are not socioeconomically privileged, describing the histories of exclusionary legislation that kept Chinese immigrants out of the country for close to a century, and explicating how the views of Asian Americans as a minority "success" story have been used to subjugate Black Americans. To anyone conversant with the Asian American Studies literature, this discussion debunking the model minority stereotype will likely be familiar—and its continual need for repetition speaks to the persistence of the myth.

Eng and Han also articulate the ways in which, despite the stereotype's general inaccuracy and negative consequences, some Asian Americans are invested in the stereotype through a kind of mimicry. They argue that because of the relative dearth of other legible narratives about what Asian Americans are like, the model

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minority stereotype can at least provide a semblance of group identity and belonging. Put another way, mimicry allows for the possibility of being somewhat legible to the mainstream, which is preferable to not being seen at all.

On a broader level, Eng and Han argue that the model minority stereotype operates as a tool of “national forgetting” of racialized exclusion of Asians in this country. Other scholars have echoed this sentiment, going as far as to say it is a way of domesticating the foreign threat of Otherness encapsulated in the openly hostile anti-Asian Yellow Peril rhetoric of the late 19th century (Kawai, 2005; Okihiro, 1994). Furthermore, it has been argued that the myth serves to maintain an illusion of American meritocracy, a pernicious myth that maintains racial melancholia, keeping at bay collective psychic pain bound up in the realities of the inequity, enslavement, exploitation, and exclusion that have formed the basis of this nation (Cheng, 2001; Kawai, 2005; Okihiro, 1994).

This chapter explores the frequently observed phenomenon of Generation X second-generation Asian Americans in university settings (both in the clinic and the classroom) presenting with depression and suicidality in response to the pressure to achieve and to be “a model minority,” while bearing various intergenerational burdens. Eng and Han conceive of this set of issues as a kind of racial melancholia: a “depathologized” condition of being Asian in America, one defined by being interstitial, liminal, and ambivalent, racially positioned “between” Whiteness and Color, and culturally “between” America and Asia.

Racially, Eng and Han posit that for people of color, “processes of assimilation are suspended, conflicted, and unresolved” (p. 36). In other words, the inability to blend into the American melting pot the way White Americans can, keeps ideals of Whiteness (and along with that, a hope of “complete” assimilation and achievement of the American dream) “at an unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal” (p. 36).

Simultaneously, there exists for many Asian Americans a fraught identification with Asian cultures, a relationship mediated by the real and narrativized relationships to Asian immigrant parents, by stereotypes and the popular imagination, and by the idea of the American dream. With regard to first-generation Asian immigrants and their children in the United States, one narrative predominates the social imaginary and influences Asian Americans’ identities: Asian immigrants come to the United States, sacrificing financial security, community, the familiarity of cultural customs, and a sense of home, in order to provide opportunities for academic and professional success for their children in a place that ostensibly rewards hard work with upward mobility. One common effect of such a narrative is that children carry the burdens of their parents’ expectations and feel a sense that they must pay back this unsolicited debt through achievement, often at the expense of their mental health and/or clarity about their own desires.

Eng and Han rightfully challenge this narrative, reframing it as perhaps saying more about parents’ thwarted ambitions than their children’s ability to achieve. In other words, they wonder whether the narrative of sacrifice may have other meanings:

... are Asian American parents as completely selfless as the theme of sacrifice and ideals of Confucian filial tradition suggest, or is this idea a compensatory gesture that attaches itself to the losses, disappointments, and failures associated with immigration? ... But could sac-

rifice be considered the displaced residue of hope—a hope for the repairing of melancholia, of achieving the American dream? Can hope, too, be transferred from parent to child, or from child to parent? (p. 50)

I am a second-generation Taiwanese American clinical psychologist at the cusp of Generations X and Y, and the themes in this chapter struck so many chords as to be deafening; it brought on a flood of insights, questions, resolutions, and at times, excruciating pain.

My mother and father were part of the generation of highly educated Asian immigrants who came to the United States in the late 1960s, both of them coming from Taiwan to the United States for graduate school in architecture. If the event of immigration allowed our family access to academic opportunities, it was not unambiguously good to us; my father’s ambition to have his own business and subsequent failure saddled our family with debt. Adding insult to injury, this disappointment weighed heavily on my father who grew up with little means and desperately wanted to provide for us. He developed intense depression and anxiety that I believe stemmed from profound feelings of shame and that eventually crippled him. With the support of my mother, he sought professional help from a counselor who told him “not to worry” and suggested that he “take a vacation.” His condition worsened and shortly thereafter, at age 44, he took his own life. I was 6 years old.

As is common in the aftermath of trauma, several corrective fantasies enter my mind as a way of reckoning with my father’s death. *Racial Melancholia*, *Racial Dissociation*, and this chapter, in particular, sparked three specific ones that highlight the extent to which my father’s life and death were affected by social histories of Asian immigrants in this country.

Before I was born, my family had planned to return to Taiwan so my father could pursue professional opportunities there, but a physical injury changed his mind. In our family mythology, this serendipitous event was a crucial turning point. My mother still wistfully wonders aloud about the various “what ifs”: “Your father might still be alive if we had moved back to Taiwan. He might have been a business owner. Maybe we’d be divorced.” Considering this fantasy forces me to envision a world in which I do not exist, but more to the point, it signals an awareness that being in the United States, that encountering both the fantasy and realities of the American dream, kickstarted a series of events that indirectly contributed to my father’s demise.

Ironically, over 30 years later, my sisters and I could be seen as having “achieved” the American dream. Far from this being a sign of a cultural disposition, our achievement has multiple idiosyncratic meanings and costs. There is no way around understanding that our success could not have happened without my father’s death. I mean this in the sense that the drive with which we acted was both a way of living out some of the dreams my father never realized and, at the same time, a way to demonstrate that this tragedy would not stop us. In Eng and Han’s terms, it raises the question: was our ambition the displaced residue of my father’s and mother’s hope and an attempt to undo loss?

Second, taking my mother’s report of my father’s therapy session with a grain of salt, I ponder the (unconscious) social factors that may have influenced his counselor’s impressions. I do not

doubt that to some extent my father hid his own pain, but I am left wondering what made the counselor convinced that there was nothing more to worry about than work stress when the benefit of hindsight clearly tells us the opposite? What aspects of my father's presentation, including his race/ethnicity and the idea that he was a model minority might have blinded the counselor to the depth of my father's suffering and desperate need for help? What impact did the counselor's interventions unwittingly have on his experience?

Along these lines, I let myself wonder if there had been some way, whether in therapy or outside of it, for my father to understand his shame as at least partly a social and collective phenomenon, might it not have felt as crushing? Might he not have felt as alone, as trapped? Might this have guided him toward a different outcome?

While these questions are fruitless in terms of saving my father, they do impact how I understand his loss and the various contributions to what killed him. In other words, this book helped me to place my father's death in the context of "immigration, assimilation, and racialization," ultimately making more sense of his death, bringing me to a deeper level of resolution in my grief, and allowing me another way of living with his ghost (p. 35).

For the living, this kind of sense making and contextualizing wields real power to alleviate suffering, create a sense of belonging and solidarity, and generate new ways of being in the world. In my clinical work with Asian American patients, recent immigrants struggling to make ends meet through several jobs while attending school full-time have implored, "What am I doing wrong? Am I working hard enough?" Others, in the midst of the confusing mix of emotions that often accompany microaggressions and casual racism, wonder if they are entitled to the slights that they feel, but struggle to name. Still others have, at their core, known that they have never felt they belonged anywhere, but have never expressed this to anyone else. I have observed that finding ways to articulate and contextualize this pain and to bear it with another has been the first of many steps in the messy and unpredictable process of grieving what is lost in them.

But part of what makes racial melancholia feel ungrievable for many Asian Americans is that there has been only a collective whisper around the infinite variations of this pain, which only serves to amplify the experience of it. Eng and Han's work takes a very big step toward correcting this lacuna through creating a "more responsive psychoanalytic theory and practice attuned to racial pain and the psychic predicaments of our Asian American students and patients" (p. 21), thus expanding the usefulness of the psychoanalytic lexicon. In this vein, their creative use of punctuation in several of their terms (e.g., "Assimilation As/And Melancholia" on p. 35) signals the necessity for a flexible stretching of our current language that is inclusive of the differences and complexities of Asian American experiences without falling into a discourse of radical difference (e.g., Roland, 2006).

In their second chapter, "Desegregating Love: Transnational Adoption, Racial Reparation, and Racial Transitional Objects," Eng and Han share an evocative discussion of Han's patient Mina, a female Korean American transracial adoptee whom a pregnant Han eventually helps guide through a process of healing and integration by being a (racial) transitional object for Mina's feel-

ings toward her Korean birth mother and White adoptive mother. The process helps Mina to create a more internalized sense of home that is less rigidly attached to location or racial stereotypes. It is a powerful case that showcases one version of the psychic and relational complexities of what it means to live as a transracial/transnational Asian American adoptee and opens up the possibilities for race as a transitional space.

The remaining two chapters focus on Eng and Han's conception of racial dissociation and a contemporary generation of Asian immigrants for whom racial issues seem to recede into the background, but nevertheless quietly exert their influence. "Racial Dissociation: Parachute Children and Psychic Nowhere" describes the sociocultural phenomenon of parachute children, Asian minors who are sent abroad to the United States and other Western nations for their education, with an eye toward admission to an American university. Using Bromberg and Winnicott, Eng and Han explore racial dissociation as a psychic phenomenon, mainly through parachute children's existence in a "psychic nowhere," a condition of physical autonomy and emotional autonomy associated with the "absence of a clear geographic belonging or destination" (p. 109). They highlight ways in which parachute children can become dissociated from different racial self-states without being able to maintain a coherent racial identity.

The final chapter, "(Gay) Panic Attack: Coming Out in a Colorblind Age" uses case studies of gay millennial parachute children to explore the politics of colorblindness and queer liberalism in a "multicultural moment under neoliberalism and globalization" (p. 29). Here, Eng and Han explore racial dissociation mainly as a social phenomenon in which race acts as a collective unconscious that manifests as diffuse symptoms (in these particular case examples, as dissociation and panic attacks) without an identifiable source.

The chapters on racial dissociation lacked the clarity of the first two chapters; at times, the prose became unwieldy in its expansive reach and racial dissociation felt like a slippery concept, made even more so by the shifts in levels of analysis from intrapsychic to collective. Of course, this is, in some ways, precisely their point—they argue that race has become so dissociated from collective consciousness as to become dispersed and uncontained. But at the same time, I felt that some of their assertions, for instance, that we live in a "colorblind age" warranted some unpacking and acknowledgment of the limitations of their specific population. Racial dissociation is undoubtedly a useful concept, particularly on an individual level, but I think that more research would strengthen more collective claims about its incidence or generational specificity. Some conversation with clinical trauma literature, particularly the idea that pathological dissociation in a nontraumatic present is understood to be matter-out-of-place, and the centrality of reenactment, could also be fruitful in deepening understandings of racial dissociation.

The book closes with a useful epilogue that picks up on earlier embedded calls to action for generating "'good-enough' spaces" to contain collective racial grief, create opportunities for play, and stimulate supported thinking about race and Asian American identities in the clinic and classroom of the university setting (p. 179). It is my hope that clinical psychoanalysis can build upon Eng and Han's remarkable work to initiate an

ongoing inquiry into the field's blind spots regarding Asian Americans and complicity in maintaining racial hierarchies. Good enough therapeutic relationships can incite both powerful individual and social change by becoming small places of resistance against broader contexts that are persistently rejecting, alienating, and neglectful, and instead create a culture of belonging.

Above all, Eng and Han have given Asian Americans something that has long been denied, both in psychoanalysis, and more generally in the United States—they grant us a chance to be *real* and, simultaneously, *to be seen* as real. The publication of this book, in and of itself, is something to be celebrated. But it is also a signal of the arduous and important work ahead.

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