

THE MELANCHOLY OF RACE

*Psychoanalysis, Assimilation,
and Hidden Grief*



ANNE ANLIN CHENG

Grieving is a pattern that is cut
and fitted around my mind.

—*Elektra*, Sophocles
translated by Anne Carson

Grievances are a form of impatience.
Griefs are a form of patience.

—Robert Frost



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Quantifying Grief

How does an individual go from being a subject of grief to being a subject of grievance? What political and psychical gains or losses transpire in the process?

This transformation from grief to grievance, from suffering injury to speaking out against that injury, has always provoked profound questions about the meaning of hurt and its impact. Although it may seem that the existence of racial injury in this country is hardly debatable, it is precisely at moments when racial injury is most publicly pronounced that its substance and tangibility come most stringently into question. The struggle to translate racial grief into social claims, for instance, formed a central drama in the desegregation of the nation. Arguably the most momentous Supreme Court ruling in United States history, *Brown v. Board of Education*¹ (1954) overturned the Court's 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld Jim Crow laws through the chimera of "separate but equal" public accommodations and institutions for blacks and whites. It was the moment when American apartheid gave way. In his effort to challenge *Plessy v. Ferguson* and to argue that "separate is inherently unequal" even if the facilities are materially equal, NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall enlisted the help of social psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark, whose work focused on the detrimental effects of racism on children of color.

The use of psychological evidence had been introduced into the courts by the turn of the century, but Marshall's use of it was a gamble.² As Marshall warned Clark, whatever psychological evidence they gathered had "to prove damage."³ The social psychologists assembled by Kenneth Clark to write the document entitled "The Effect of Segregation and the Consequences of Desegregation—A Social Science Statement," which served as

an appendix to Marshall's oral argument, struggled through painstaking revisions, haunted by several problems, not the least of which were the very definition of the term "damage," the quantification of grief, and the translation of so-called scientific data into social meaning.⁴ Indeed, in court, the appellees' brief asserted that the "Finding of Fact" on the part of the appellants presented no fact at all but "broad and general conclusions" that could not prove "actual personal harm" or the deprivation of quantifiable benefits.⁵

Yet in an astounding response, the Supreme Court turned away from the sole authority of constitutional history (finding the history of the debates surrounding the Fourteenth Amendment "inconclusive" and insufficient to the question at hand) and drew instead from the very evidence that had seemed eccentric. Chief Justice Earl Warren specifically cited the "authority" of the social psychologists and the "Social Science Statement" as a decisive factor in the ruling to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson*, concurring with Marshall's argument that "separate is inherently unequal." The opinion of the Court reads:

Our decision . . . cannot turn on merely a comparison of . . . tangible factors in the Negro and white schools involved in each of these cases. We must look instead to the effect of segregation itself on public education. . . .

Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of minority groups of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does. . . .

To separate [minority children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.⁶

This decision is momentous for many reasons, but one of those reasons must be the expansion in the notion of justice to accommodate the "intangible" effects of racism. The original *Brown* ruling then may be said to be an unprecedented judgment about the necessity of examining the invisible but tenacious aspect of racism—of allowing racial grief to have its say even if it cannot definitively speak in the language of material grievance.

This receptivity proved to have lasting legal and philosophical ramifications—both positive and threatening—for segregationists and liberals alike. This attention to the "hearts and minds" of raced subjects has taken on many contradictory nuances in the years since. Almost a decade after the pivotal decision in *Brown v. Board*, the same evidence resurfaces in another class action suit—this time, on behalf of white southern segregationists. In 1963 in Savannah, Georgia, a suit (*Stell v. Savannah-Chatham County Board of*

Education) was filed by African American parents against the Chatham County Board of Education for conducting "biracial" education; that is, the county had integrated black and white children in the schools but not in the classrooms. A group of white parents joined the defense as supporting intervenors and, in a surprising move, cited the social psychology evidence from the *Brown* case as an argument for segregation, contending that segregation will grant black children the opportunity to develop a stronger, "healthier," more independent black identity.⁷ These "intervenors" (that is, a third party, not named in a case, that offers evidence on the grounds that its interests are involved) brought in further psychological evidence contending that "major differences exist in the learning ability patterns of white and Negro children," hence the benefit of separate education for both black and white children.⁸ This line of argument advanced by the white segregationists aimed to transform psychical damage as the result of social injury into a notion of inherent disability. The initially liberating concept of psychical injury from the *Brown* case has suddenly taken on the unsavory look of racist weapon. Within this new context, the last clause of Chief Justice Warren's statement about racist effects (as "unlikely ever to be undone") started to resound with different aftereffects. In short, we were witnessing the beginnings of the slip from *recognizing* to *naturalizing* injury.⁹

In this brief history we see all the urgencies and complications surrounding formulations of racial injury. The debate continues today. In Austin Sarat's words, *Brown* was "at once a turning point and a source of resistance, a point of pride and an object of vilification" (5). The legacy of *Brown* in the fields of law, sociology, psychology, and advocacy continues to change as the case gets narrated and renarrated in these disciplines.¹⁰ Contemporary scholars in race studies have come to join researchers in social science and psychology to challenge the scientific legitimacy of Clark's methods and to critique, at times stridently, his conclusions (for example, James Alsbrook, H. S. Ashmore, Leon Jones, Judith Porter and Robert Washington, Gloria Powell-Hopson, and Austen Sarat). Others have emphasized the resiliency of minority group members in the face of discrimination (Harriette McAdoo). African Americans in the seventies, for example, were encouraged to internalize the Black Is Beautiful credo and to fight actively against discrimination rather than to permit the degradation of the self. While this urge to reclaim racial beauty has always seemed to say more about the keenness of the hurt than a cure, it is even more disturbing to find certain leftist, anti-assimilation advocates today speaking from a position that eerily echoes racist enunciations: the rhetoric of solidarity speaking in the rhetoric of isolation.¹¹

An equal amount of work has reiterated both Clark's original line of investigation and his findings. Sociologists and psychologists over the years have continued to expand and conduct versions of the Clark doll test, sug-

gesting that the question of psychical injury remains a pressing one.¹² As recently as August 1999, the *Atlantic Monthly* published the work of social psychologist Claude M. Steele, who, in researching the relationship between the self-perception of black college students and their "inferior" academic performance, was anxious not to repeat the damage hypothesis even as he asserted that material factors such as socioeconomic differences are not the only or even primary culprits. Steele refines the idea of psychological impact: what he calls the "stereotype threat" that haunts African American students and inevitably accompanies and hinders their performances.¹³

Racial ideals continue to drive those most oppressed by it. Even market researchers have become invested in this question of racial preference. In 1995 the *Boston Herald* featured an article on the toy giant Mattel, who spent millions of dollars in market research and new product development only to find, as the article muses, what Kenneth Clark could have told them nearly fifty years ago: that African American (and other ethnic) children, given the chance, would rather play with a blond, blue-eyed Barbie than dolls that "look more like themselves."¹⁴ In African American communities, skin lightening cream has enjoyed a long and profitable history. (One of the first black millionaires in America, A'leila Walker, was heiress to a fortune made in black hair straighteners and skin lightening cream.)¹⁵ In 1996 Linda Brown, for whom the celebrated *Brown* case was named, filed another suit against the same Topeka school system her parents filed against over forty years before.¹⁶ In a sense, the drama of *Brown v. Board* and those dolls has been repeatedly reenacted in the last four decades across America in courtrooms, in classrooms, in boardrooms, and in homes.

My intention here is not to privilege the Clark experiment as correct or to prove white preference but to direct attention to the facts that racial preference and its inverse have persisted as an interpretive and ideologically invested question. Moreover, we hardly know how to confront the psychical imprints of racial grief except through either neglect or sentimentalization. Part of the problem has to do with how we understand social healing and the tendency to rely on exclusively material or quantifiable terms to articulate that injury. The vocabulary of grievance (and its implied logic of comparability and compensation) that constitutes so much of American political discourse has ironically deflected attention away from a serious look at the more immaterial, unquantifiable repository of public and private grief that has gone into the making of the so-called minority subject and that sustains the notion of "one nation."

The prospect of integrating a history of fierce difference, social injustice, and psychical injury into one nation has proven to be one of the more unyielding tasks of social progress. Our first lesson must be to not mistake an attention to the psychical for essentialization. Both essentializing and denying the deep psychological impact of discrimination are equally troubling.

There are still deep-seated, intangible, psychical complications for people living within a ruling episteme that privileges that which they can never be. This does *not* at all mean that the minority subject does not develop other relations to that injunctive ideal which can be self-affirming or sustaining but rather that a painful negotiation must be undertaken, at some point if not continually, with the demands of that social ideality, the reality of that always-insisted-on difference. Beneath the reductionist, threatening diagnosis of "inferiority complex" or "white preference" there runs a fraught network of ongoing psychical negotiation instigated and institutionalized by racism. The connection between subjectivity and social damage needs to be formulated in terms more complicated than either resigning colored people to the irrevocability of "self-hatred" or denying racism's profound, lasting effects.

If one traditional method of restitution has been the conversion of the disenfranchised person from being subjected to grief to being a subject speaking grievance, what are the advantages and disadvantages of that transformation? What can political agency mean for someone operating in a symbolic, cultural economy that has already preassigned them as a deficit? The contemporary American attachment to progress and healing, eagerly anticipating a colorblind society, sidesteps the important examination of racialization: How is a racial identity secured? How does it continue to generate its seduction for both the dominant and the marginalized? And what are the repercussions, both historical and personal, of that ongoing history? While much critical energy has been directed toward deconstructing categories such as gender and race, less attention has been given to the ways in which individuals and communities remain invested in maintaining such categories, even when such identities prove to be prohibitive or debilitating. The rhetoric of progress or cure can produce its own blind spots. As Christopher Lasch puts it, "[a] denial of the past, superficially progressive and optimistic, proves on closer analysis to embody the despair of a society that cannot face the future."¹⁷ And when it comes to the future of the race question, to borrow Faulkner's words, the past is not dead; it is not even past. Rather than prescribing how we as a nation might go about "getting over" that history, it is useful to ask what it means, for social, political, and subjective beings to grieve.

Melancholic Formations

In 1917, Freud wrote an essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," which proposes two different kinds of grief.¹⁸ According to Freud, "mourning" is a healthy response to loss; it is finite in character and accepts substitution (that is, the lost object can be relinquished and eventually replaced). Mourning

is healthy because, Freud tells us, "we rest assured that after a lapse of time, it will be overcome" (MM, 240). "Melancholia," on the other hand, is pathological; it is interminable in nature and refuses substitution (that is, the melancholic cannot "get over" loss).¹⁹ The melancholic is, one might say, psychically stuck. As Freud puts it, "[i]n grief [mourning] the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself." Melancholia thus denotes a condition of endless self-impoverishment.

Curiously, however, this impoverishment is also nurturing. In fact, Freud describes melancholia as a kind of consumption:

An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. The result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different. . . . [T]he free libido . . . was withdrawn into the ego . . . to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object. *Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego. . . .*

The ego wishes to incorporate this object into itself, and the method by which it would do so, in this oral or cannibalistic stage, is by devouring it. (MM, 248–250; my emphasis)

The melancholic eats the lost object—feeds on it, as it were.

This apparently abnormal way of digesting loss seems to occupy an inversely primary role in psychical formation, for Freud tells us that melancholia affords us the rare chance of viewing "the constitution of the human ego" (MM, 247). Freudian melancholia designates a chain of loss, denial, and incorporation through which the ego is born. As other readers of Freud have pointed out, it is unclear in Freud's essay whether there could have been an ego prior to melancholia, since the ego comes into being as a psychical object, as a perceptual object, only after the "shadow of the object" has fallen upon it.²⁰ By taking in the other-made-ghostly, the melancholic subject fortifies him- or herself and grows rich in impoverishment. The history of the ego is thus the history of its losses. More accurately, melancholia alludes not to loss per se but to the entangled relationship with loss. We might then say that melancholia does not simply denote a *condition* of grief but is, rather, a *legislation* of grief.

Moreover, there are drawbacks to this "dining" and self-constituting experience. The "swallowing" does not go down easily. As the libido turns back on the ego, so do the feelings of guilt, rage, and punishment (Freudian melancholia is anything but mild!) originally attached to the initial object of loss and disappointment. The "shadow of the object" that falls on the ego carries with it a reproach. Since the melancholic subject experiences resentment and deni-

gation for the lost object with which he or she is identifying, the melancholic ends up administering to his or her own self-denigration. Implicit in the essay is the profound ambivalence that continues to be generated around the "swallowed" object. The melancholic's relationship to the object is now no longer just love or nostalgia but also profound resentment. The melancholic is not melancholic because he or she has lost something but because he or she has introjected that which he or she now reviles. Thus the melancholic is stuck in more ways than just temporally; he or she is stuck—almost choking on—the hateful and loved thing he or she just devoured. Freud writes, that melancholics' "complaints are really 'plaint' in the old sense of the word. They are not ashamed and do not hide themselves, since everything derogatory that they say about themselves is at bottom said about someone else" (MM, 248).²¹ Although Freud is right in pointing out that the source of the plaint is against the object, if we were to follow his logic that the thing-within is now the ego, then we would also have to see that the plaint can no longer properly belong to either subject or object since the two are now intrinsically (con)fused.

At this moment *loss* becomes *exclusion* in the melancholic landscape. What Freud does not address in this essay but what must be a consequence of this psychical drama is the multiple layers of denial and exclusion that the melancholic must exercise in order to maintain this elaborate structure of loss-but-not-loss. First, the melancholic must deny loss as loss in order to sustain the fiction of possession. Second, the melancholic would have to make sure that the "object" never returns, for such a return would surely jeopardize the cannibalistic project that, one might note, is a form of possession more intimate than any material relationship could produce. Thus although it may seem reasonable to imagine that the griever may wish for the return of the loved one, once this digestive process has occurred, the ego may in fact not want or cannot afford such homecoming. As Thomas Mann once put it,

the calling back of the dead, or the desirability of calling them back, was a ticklish matter after all. At bottom, and boldly confessed, the desire does not exist; it is a *misapprehension* precisely as impossible as the thing itself, as we should soon see if nature once let it happen. What we call mourning for our dead is perhaps not so much grief at not being able to call them back as it is grief at not being able to want to do so.²²

Mann's account of grief's dilemma is really elucidating the melancholic ambivalence toward the object. At the heart of loss there is now an active exclusion and denial of the object. In a sense, exclusion, rather than loss, is the real stake of melancholic retention. Indeed, Freud's text itself may be considered quite melancholic in its ruthless exclusion of the object. For the ego is not the only ghostly presence in this essay. That is, the melancholic ego is a haunted ego, at once made ghostly and embodied in its ghostliness, but the

"object" is also ghostly—not only because its image has been introjected or incorporated within the melancholic psyche but also because Freud is finally not that interested in what happens to the object or its potential for subjectivity.²³

Thus the melancholic ego as formed and fortified by a spectral drama, whereby the subject sustains itself through the ghostly emptiness of a lost other. Several aspects of this psychical drama are relevant to this study's interest in American racial dynamics. First, it is this peculiar and uneasy dynamic of retaining a denigrated but sustaining loss that resonates most acutely against the mechanisms of the racial imaginary as they have been fashioned in this country. While psychoanalytic readings of melancholia have been mostly theorized in relation to gender formation,²⁴ melancholia also presents a particularly apt paradigm for elucidating the activity and components of racialization. Racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others. The national topography of centrality and marginality legitimizes itself by retroactively positing the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation. Legal exclusion naturalizes the more complicated "loss" of the unassimilable racial other.

Second, Freud's notion of this uncomfortable swallowing and its implications for how loss is processed and then secured as exclusion lend provocative insights into the nature of the racial other seen as "the foreigner within" America. In a sense, the racial other is in fact quite "assimilated" into—or, more accurately, most uneasily digested by—American nationality. The history of American national idealism has always been caught in this melancholic bind between incorporation and rejection. If one of the ideals that sustained the American nation since its beginning has been its unique proposition that "all men are created equal," then one of America's ongoing national mortifications must be its history of acting otherwise. While all nations have their repressed histories and traumatic atrocities, American melancholia is particularly acute because America is founded on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over. Even as the economic, material, and philosophical advances of the nation are built on a series of legalized exclusions (of African Americans, Jewish Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and so on) and the labor provided by those excluded, it is also a history busily disavowing those repudiations. In his essay "The Two Declarations of American Independence," Michael Rogin suggests that this paradox erupts on the very surface of the Declaration of Independence:

The Declaration of Independence, demanding freedom from enslavement to England for a new nation built on slavery, is the core product of that

mésalliance in political theory. . . . [The Declaration] bequeathed a Janus-faced legacy to the new nation—the logic on the one hand that the equality to which white men were naturally born could be extended to women and slaves, and the foundation on the other of white freedom on black servitude.²⁵

Melancholia thus describes both an American ideological dilemma and its constitutional practices.

Rogin further posits in *Blackface, White Noise* that "racial exclusions, be it chattel slavery, the expropriation of Indian and Mexicans, or the repressive use and exclusion of Chinese and Mexican American labor, were the conditions of American freedom rather than exceptions to it."²⁶ It is at those moments when America is most shamefaced and traumatized by its betrayal of its own democratic ideology (the genocide of Native Americans, slavery, segregation, immigration discrimination) that it most virulently—and melancholically—espouses human value and brotherhood. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson, for example, meditates on his discomfort about the apparent discrepancy between the Declaration of Independence and the colonial practice of slavery only to console himself by reassuring himself and his readers that the inhumanity of blacks exempted them from considerations such as human rights, freedom, and equality. Blacks were seen as lost to moral and human concerns. Through this consolation of philosophy (which exemplifies his melancholic relationship to blackness), Jefferson disentangles the new republic from the ideological burdens of slavery and at the same time reconciles slavery to the ideology of the new nation. Precisely because the American history of exclusion, imperialism, and colonization runs so antithetical to the equally and particularly American narrative of liberty and individualism, cultural memory in America poses a continuously vexing problem: How does the nation "go on" while remembering those transgressions? How does it sustain the remnants of denigration and disgust created in the name of progress and the formation of an American identity?

Dominant white identity in America operates melancholically—as an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social consumption-and-denial. This diligent system of melancholic retention appears in different guises. Both racist and white liberal discourses participate in this dynamic, albeit out of different motivations. The racists need to develop elaborate ideologies in order to accommodate their actions with official American ideals,²⁷ while white liberals need to keep burying the racial others in order to memorialize them. Those who do not see the racial problem or those who call themselves nonideological are the most melancholic of all because in today's political climate, as Toni Morrison exclaims in *Playing in the Dark*, "it requires hard work not to see."²⁸ Both violent vilification and

the indifference to vilification express, rather than invalidate, the melancholic dynamic. Indeed, melancholia offers a powerful critical tool precisely because it theoretically *accounts* for the guilt and the denial of guilt, the blending of shame and omnipotence in the racist imaginary.

Like melancholia, racism is hardly ever a clear rejection of the other. While racism is mostly thought of as a kind of violent rejection, racist institutions in fact often do not want to fully expel the racial other; instead, they wish to maintain that other within existing structures. With phenomena such as segregation and colonialism, the racial question is an issue of *place* (the literalization of Freudian melancholic suspension) rather than of full relinquishment. Segregation and colonialism are internally fraught institutions not because they have eliminated the other but because they need the very thing they hate or fear. (This is why trauma, so often associated with discussions of racial denigration, in focusing on a structure of crisis on the part of the victim, misses the violators' own dynamic process at stake in such denigration. Melancholia gets more potently at the notion of constitutive loss that expresses itself in both violent and muted ways, producing confirmation as well as crisis, knowledge as well as aporia.)

American values tend to acquire their sharpest outline *through*, not in spite of, the nexus of investment and anxiety provoked by slavery and other institutions of discrimination. As Eric Lott and Michael Rogin have so well demonstrated in their works on blackface minstrelsy, the dominant culture's relation to the raced other displays an entangled network of repulsion and sympathy, fear and desire, repudiation and identification. As Paul Gilroy observes in *The Black Atlantic*, "the consciousness of European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the "Indians" they slaughtered, and the Asians they indentured were not, even in the situations of most extreme brutality, sealed off hermetically from one another."²⁹ It is this imbricated but denied relationship that forms the basis of white racial melancholia.

Racial melancholia plays itself out not only in national formation but also in one of its expressions: the formation of canonical literature. By citing African American presence as the formative but denied ghost in the heart of American literature, Toni Morrison has essentially identified the national literary canon as a melancholic corpus. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison calls for "an examination and reinterpretation of the American canon, the founding nineteenth-century works, for the 'unspeakable things unspoken'; for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure, and the meaning of so much American literature."³⁰ The canon is a melancholic corpus because of what it excludes but cannot forget—what Morrison calls "the ghost in the machine." Other critics have observed that social categories that exemplify conditions of marginality have in fact been long central to the making of the "mainstream" insofar as they serve to define and delimit that recognized "center."³¹ Gilroy

suggests that the "cultural history of blacks in the modern world has a great bearing on ideas of what the West was and is today" (45). And in talking about the psychodynamics of black-white relations, Frantz Fanon writes that "the black man is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated."³²

American literature and nationhood contain other suspended, racialized "ghosts" as well. Rogin points out that critics from D. H. Lawrence to Richard Slotkin have contended that "American literature . . . established its national identity in the struggle between Indians and whites."³³ In her study of early American novel of the Federalist period, Julia Stern suggests that the very founding of the American republic already embodies such a complex relation to "other" raced bodies, pointing out that early American fiction registers the elaborate cost of the Framers' vision:

Such literature suggests that the foundation of the republic is in fact a crypt, that the nation's noncitizens—women, the poor, Native Americans, African Americans, and aliens—lie socially dead and inadequately buried, the casualties of post-Revolutionary political foreclosure.³⁴

Realizing the full extent of Morrison's ghostly allegory, Stern spells out the structure of loss, grief, and entombment on which the origins of the American dream were built:

These invisible Americans, prematurely interred beneath the great national edifice whose erection they actually enable, provide an unquiet platform for the construction of republican privilege, disturbing the Federalist monolith in powerful ways.³⁵

Stern places racialization in the dead center of the American founding, arguing that race constitutes a distinctive locus of exclusion for American nationality.

The disparity between Enlightenment ideal and social practices is only an active expression of the fundamental tension in the democratic ideal that still haunts us today. In tracing another American frontier, David Palumbo-Liu argues, in *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, that in the last century and a half American citizenship has been legally, economically, and culturally *defined* over and against the simultaneous exclusion and the unseen racialization of the Asian immigrant.³⁶ Race has always and continues to constitute an unresolved issue in the evolution of American democracy.

But how does recognizing this melancholic dilemma underlying dominant power *help* those who have been buried and then resuscitated only as serviceable ghosts? It is one thing to unveil authority's internal contradictions and debts; it is another to imagine that this critique addresses suffer-

ing on the part of those who have supposedly been interred. Indeed, melancholic suspension rather than interment may be a more fruitful and perhaps more accurate description for the status of the racial other in this system of consumption and denial. Let us ask the question that Freud does not ask: What is the subjectivity of the melancholic object? Is it also melancholic, and what will we uncover when we resuscitate it? In other words, what implications do insights into the melancholic origins of American racial-national identity hold for the study of the racialized subjects?

Melancholic Responses

It may appear tremendously difficult to talk about the “melancholia” of racialized peoples, especially since it seems to reinscribe a whole history of affliction or run the risk of naturalizing that pain. In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors talks about “Indian melancholy,” referring not to how Native Americans process their history of genocide but to how dominant American culture romanticizes and naturalizes “the cult of the vanishing Indians.”³⁷ The rhetoric of the “melancholic Indian and his fate” serves to legitimize the future of the white conqueror. In the African American tradition, Richard Wright notes that the African American community embodies a “tradition of bitterness . . . so complex . . . as to assume such a tight, organic form that most white people would think upon examining it that most Negroes had embedded in their flesh and bones some peculiar propensity towards lamenting and complaining.”³⁸ Talking about racial grief thus also runs the risk of repeating a tool of containment historically exercised by authority. The worry is of course that such a focus on injury might be naturalized and used against the plaintiffs, as was the case with *Stell v. Savannah-Chatham Board of Education*. The path connecting injury to pity and then to contempt can be very brief.³⁹ In short, it can be damaging to say how damaging racism has been.

Yet it is surely equally harmful *not* to talk about this history of sorrow. The ontological and psychical status of a social subject who has been made into an “object,” a “loss,” an “invisibility,” or a “phantom” has never been fully explored, since the implications of such a study are on the one hand inconvenient to a racist culture and on the other potentially threatening to the project of advocacy—or at least advocacy as it is traditionally conceived.⁴⁰ The quick jump from psychical injury to inherent disability (as exemplified by *Stell*) provides an example of the kind of imprecise thinking surrounding perceptions of the relationship between psychical response and social influence. The historical use of psychology in racial analyses has suffered from a series of elisions: (1) the tendency to confuse psychological analysis with prescription; (2) the assumption that “damage” (in the form

of having internalized harmful dominant ideals) amounts to the same thing as having no agency or, conversely, the presumption that having agency or “a strong ego” makes one impermeable to such invasions; (3) the neglect of authority’s melancholic attachments; and, finally, (4) the failure to address the psychodynamics of psychological vulnerability and their *intrinsic* relations to identificatory and subject formations—formations that are as unstable as they are historical, as multifaceted as they are coercive.

What is needed is a serious effort at rethinking the term “agency” in relation to forms of racial grief, to broaden the term beyond the assumption of a pure sovereign subject to other manifestations, forms, tonalities, and gradations of governance. When it comes to facing discrimination, we need to understand subjective agency as a convoluted, ongoing, generative, and at times self-contradicting negotiation with pain. To reduce the issue of psychical injury to a simplistic and prescriptive pronouncement of black self-hatred is to miss a fundamental insight revealed by Clark’s work and the works of those after him: that the psychology being dramatized by those children in the doll tests reveals the results, not the cause, of social relations. At the very least, Clark’s lifelong work shows that social relations *live* at the heart of psychical dynamics and that the complexity of those dynamics be-speaks a wide range of complicated, conflictual, interlocking emotions: desire and doubt, affirmation and rejection, projection and identification, management and dysfunction. This debate, which has in essence lasted over fifty years and shows no signs of resolution, is really a debate about the assignment of social meaning to psychical processes. And restricting the terms of this debate is the stubborn antipathy between advocacy and more complex signs of cultural desire and unease.⁴¹

One place where such complex signs come into play and where such complexity gets theorized is literature. My purpose here is not to locate in literary works the “truth” of colored people’s self-hatred or to diagnose symptoms of racial injury in literary texts. Rather, my intention is to discern how these cultural texts (free from certain immediate political-legal protocols but nonetheless speaking to those demands) tease out the complex social etiology behind the phenomenon of racial grief. In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, a text whose treatise on black invisibility might be seen as a forerunner to Morrison’s “ghost in the machine,” Ellison gives us an enigmatic picture of a racist encounter. In the opening sequence, after telling us that he is invisible “because [white] people refuse to see [him],” the narrator runs into a violent confrontation:

One night I accidentally bumped into a man . . . he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me . . . I yelled, “Apologize! Apologize!” But he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily. . . . I kicked him profusely . . . when it oc-

curred to me that the man had not *seen* me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was walking in the midst of a walking nightmare . . . a man almost killed by a phantom.⁴²

I call this scene enigmatic because the description opens up a range of questions about the difference between perception and projection, between action and reaction. To begin with, from the narrator's perspective, we see the white man's "insolence" as anger from having to confront what he presumably did not want to see. The white man's curse, upon being bumped, expresses an active wish to deny the invisible object now demanding a competing presence. What the narrator thinks troubles the white man is the "bumping"—that *point of contact with invisibility*—that has in fact historically ensured the white man's ability to see and to not see.⁴³ This white man both sees and does not see the black man in that alley. In describing a white store owner who had difficulties seeing a little black girl right under his nose trying to buy candy from him in *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison depicts a similar moment of seeing/not-seeing. She describes the man as having been "blunted by a permanent awareness of loss."⁴⁴ In this subtly turned phrase, Morrison has located the precise and peculiar nature of "loss" in white racial melancholia: teetering between the known and the unknown, the seen and the deliberately unseen, the racial other constitutes an oversight that is consciously made unconscious—naturalized over time as absence, as complementary negative space. It is precisely the slippery distance between loss and exclusion that racial myopia effects. Part of the central dilemma of dominant racial melancholia—since its authority is constituted, sustained, and made productive by this system of the suspended other—is that it does not really want the lost other to return (or demand its right of way).

At the same time, when we enter Ellison's scene more fully, we have to ask: Is the white man the only one suffering from not-seeing in this scenario? The writing is ambiguous. Who is the invisible one? If the narrator bumps into the white man, is not the white man the one who is invisible to the black man? The narrator bumps into what *he* did not see and then accuses the other of blindness. If we do not take the narrator's account at its surface value, it is conceivable that the white man cursed the black man for his clumsiness rather than for racist reasons (that masculinist rather than racial confrontation may be at stake) and that the narrator's interpretation of "insolence" may be itself a melancholic response to the (historically) incendiary sign of "blue eyes" and his own self-denigration and wounded pride. That invisibility is rarely a one-way street is one of its most insidious effects. In this confrontation, there is potential mutual invisibility and mutual projection. Indeed, the racial moment is born out of this dynamic locking of the two men in mutual projection. In a response that is both macho and hysterical, the narrator demonstrates that he is trapped, not by having

been seen as invisible but by suspecting himself to be so. This is racial melancholia for the raced subject: the internalization of discipline and rejection—and the installation of a scripted context of perception. The invisible man's racial radar, at once his perspicacity and his paranoia, is justified. For the Invisible man is both a melancholic object and a melancholic subject, both the one lost and the one losing.

This internalization, far from denoting a condition of surrender, embodies a web of negotiation that expresses agency as well as abjection. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, we find another (feminine) confrontation with the sign of blue eyes and a similar response of self-denigration and pride. Morrison's child narrator describes how every Christmas she would receive the "loving gift" of a "big, blue-eyed Baby Doll":

I had only one desire: to dismember it. . . . But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. . . . What made people look at them, and say, "Awwwww," but not for me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them.

If I pinched them, their eyes—unlike the crazed glint of the baby doll's eyes—would fold in pain, and their cry would not be the sound of an ice box, but a fascinating cry of pain. When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was . . . my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned, much later to worship her.⁴⁵

For a child coming to racial discrimination, affective formation and distinction (how one tells the difference between love and hate) become so entangled and twisted that love and hate both come to be "fabricated" and "fraudulent." We are witnessing the loss of affective discrimination in the face of racial discrimination. The social lesson of racial minoritization reinforces itself through the imaginative loss of a never-possible perfection, whose loss the little girl must come to identify as a rejection of herself.

The internal processes of this lesson on the part of the child, however, embodies a critique as well. For underneath the pop-psychological insight of an "inferiority complex" lies a nexus of intertwining affects and libidinal dynamics—a web of self-affirmation, self-denigration, projection, desire, identification, and hostility. To claim that racial difference on the part of the racialized subject provokes self-shame that leads to compensatory white preference drastically foreshortens the complex process of *coming to racialization/socialization*. The pedagogy of discrimination is painfully installed in multiple stages. White preference is not a phenomenon that simply gets

handed down from society to black women and then to black girls; instead it travel a tortuous, melancholic path of alienation, resistance, aggression, and then, finally, the domestication of that aggression as "love." Here the cultural lesson and the racial lesson coincide: that is, Is not the conversion of the grief of being black into the enjoyment of whiteness a very *cultural* lesson of mastering personal displeasure as social pleasure?

In spite of the collusion between acculturation and racialization, *The Bluest Eye* tracks, rather than naturalizes, the etiology of white preference. Morrison shows us that shame does not come from the child's own blackness *per se* (the debased value placed on her blackness made the child angry, as it should, revealing in fact quite a sense of self-possession) but rather from the social message that there is no place for such anger and grief, which must go into hiding. The little girl must internalize not only the white ideal but also the ideal of black womanhood as a longing after the white ideal. That is, what is hard to swallow is not just Shirley Temple, a competition for attention, but precisely the "eye-slide" of black mothers.

This profound internalization of ideality, in its history and practice, can gesture, surprisingly, to shades of resistance as well as acquiescence: "It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement."⁴⁶ Is the concluding claim a statement about the self's continued inability to assume fully that white ideal, a reminder of the "fraudulence" that in fact conditions this adulration, an acknowledgement of the self-harming that such "preference" engenders, or even a larger allusion to the idea of African American social progress itself? The answer must be all of the above, or, at least, the statement's ambiguity informs us that, for the object of discrimination, it is impossible to disentangle these competing interests.

When a few years later Maxine Hong Kingston writes what comes to be widely acknowledged as the preeminent Asian American feminist text, *The Woman Warrior*, she stages an unforgettable scene in which the Asian American girl child narrator can be found standing in a school bathroom acting out what Morrison's narrator, Claudia, fantasizes about: pinching, pulling the hair, and otherwise abusing another girl child—except this time the other is not a white girl but someone who looks like herself. The violence that Claudia initially feels toward "little white girls," which she then turns inward, in *The Bluest Eye*, has reached a delirious re-enactment in the Kingston encounter, where the object of rage is the fantasmatic likeness of oneself. This Kingston scene of collapsed intersubjective and intrasubjective conflict in the school bathroom (which I investigate more fully in chapter 3) is most certainly having a conversation with the *Brown* legacy, Morrison's text, and the historical problem of self-denigration instituted by the pedagogy of racism. Indeed, both Morrison's and Kingston's texts remind us that

Kenneth Clark's experiment in those dusty classrooms over fifty years ago does not give us information about the psyche of black children *per se*; rather, it gave us a dramatization of an *education* of black children. Morrison and Kingston highlight the insight that the education of racism is an education of desire, a pedagogy that tethers the psychical inextricably to the social. Political domination is reproduced at the level of personal experience.

Kingston's choice of the bathroom (as a classic site of gender differentiation) further dramatizes what was left unsaid in the *Brown* doll test and implicit in the Morrison text: the configuration of gender valuation in the face of a pressing-but-exclusive racial ideal. While gender was not an element of analysis in the original Clark experiment, the receptions of the dolls by the adults themselves hint at the presence of a fair amount of gender discomfort. Descriptions of the experiment, both contemporary to the case and after, invariably alluded to gender in the form of jokes about dolls. In Richard Kluger's definitive account, *A Simple Justice*, he repeatedly made the point that the adult male lawyers on both sides of the litigation felt uncomfortable dealing with dolls. (Indeed, Kluger offers a small humorous moment in describing Clark's initial meeting with the NAACP lawyers, who found it "weird" and disturbing to find a grown man with a suitcase full of dolls. They were visibly relieved and put at ease once they received the verbal reassurance that the dolls were "for business" rather than "pleasure."⁴⁷ These men were willing to read the racial but not the gender signs to which the children were subjected.) But in the Morrison and Kingston renditions, reading race is a prerequisite to reading femininity. That is, both Claudia and Kingston's girl narrator show how femininity (what it means to be a girl) comes to acquire its social and aesthetic values under the signs of racial difference. As Elizabeth Abel reveals in her essay "Bathroom Doors and Drinking Fountains," the visual imaginary that supports Jim Crow laws, clustering around the bathroom and drinking fountains, offers a startling proposition that "race [in this case, black and white] not sex is the dyad that founds the symbolic register."⁴⁸ This insight not only disturbs the usual psychoanalytic prioritization of gender identification over racial identification but also reminds us that the American racial symbolic register is in fact not dyadic but multiple.

We continue to witness connections (even conversations) between Asian American and African American literary meditations on psychical, racial, and gender injury. Asian American critical anxiety over Kingston's supposedly damaging representation of the community (and especially of Asian American masculinity) is not so different from African American discomfort over Kenneth Clark's findings. Even as we recognize how deeply uncomfortable it is to talk about the ways the racialized minority is as bound to racial melancholia as the dominant subject, we must also see how urgent it is that we start to look at the historical, cultural, and crossracial consequences of racial wounding and to situate these effects as crucial, forma-

tive elements of individual, national, and cultural identities. Only then can we begin to go on to analyze how racialized people as complex psychical beings deal with the objecthood thrust upon them, which to a great extent constitutes how they negotiate sociality and nationality. Within the reductive notion of "internalization" lies a world of relations that is as much about surviving grief as embodying it.

The Morphology of Ghostliness

When we turn to the long history of grief and the equally protracted history of physically and emotionally managing that grief on the part of the marginalized, racialized people, we see that there has always been an interaction between *melancholy* in the vernacular sense of affect, as "sadness" or the "blues," and *melancholia* in the sense of a structural, identificatory formation predicated on—while being an active negotiation of—the loss of self as legitimacy. Indeed, racial melancholia as I am defining it has always existed for raced subjects both as a *sign* of rejection and as a *psychic strategy* in response to that rejection.

Black cultural forms have hosted and even cultivated dynamic rapport with the presence of death and suffering.⁴⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois has written of "sorrow songs," folksongs sung by the slaves, not just as expressions of sadness but as a profound spiritual wrestling with meaning and freedom in a world of immense sorrow: "they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways . . . they grope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the End."⁵⁰ In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy points out that, for the powerless, the association of death with freedom is not one of mere morbidity. On the contrary, he argues that the slaves' intimate relationship to death signals not merely a reaction to probable threat but also a *choice*. Referring to the work of Frederick Douglass, Gilroy proposes that "the slave actively prefers the possibility of death to the continuing condition of inhumanity on which plantation slavery depends" (63). Gilroy does not see this turn toward death as a giving up or empty victory; he sees it as an active act of will in a situation devoid of will. Since slavery depends on the slave being alive, the threat of suicide in this context bespeaks an unlawful act of rebellion and self-assertion. This turn toward death thus "points to the value of seeing the consciousness of the slave as involving an extended act of mourning" (63). In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman further lays out the affective and psychical intricacies of these sorrow songs:

[S]uch indulgence in song reflected neither an embrace of slavery nor a unity of feeling but . . . was a veiled articulation of the extreme and para-

doxical conditions of slavery. . . . My task is to . . . give full weight to the opacity of these texts wrought by toil, terror, and sorrow . . . [to emphasize] the significance of the opacity as precisely that which . . . troubles distinctions between joy and sorrow, toil and leisure.⁵¹

Hartman argues that, owing to the brutality of slavery, the "distinctions between joy and sorrow, toil and leisure" no longer provide productive measures of analysis. By implication, under such extreme conditions, survival and the management of grief exceed our vernacular understanding of agency, of what it means to take control of oneself and one's surroundings.

In exploring racialized minorities' melancholic responses to dominant racial melancholia, this study agrees with Gilroy's and Hartman's insights that the internalization of dominant oppression may not signal pure conformity or defeat but rather point to new ways of thinking about what agency means for one stripped of it. As Gilroy and Hartman have demonstrated, the sorrow songs confound the simple assignment of emotions (such as sadness or resignation); they indeed confound singular meaning altogether. Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison demonstrates that one of the consequences of an education in racism is the loss of affective discrimination. In the context of unimaginable, persistent racial grief, we must begin to acknowledge the complex nexus of psychical negotiations being engaged and develop a political vocabulary accordingly.

Today we need to confront the inheritance of that historical principle of negativity—not only within the African American community but also with respect to other marginalized, racialized peoples. The racialization of Asian Americans and African Americans are two distinct but related processes. This study focuses on the latter because so much of historical and contemporary racial discourse is modeled on that category and because African American studies constitutes the most established discipline in the field of race studies. As the most enduring and visible racial category in America, African American identity formation and cultural manifestations provide an important basis from which to track the process of racializing America.

I also concentrate on Asian American formation probably because of my own "tribal" allegiance and because I want to understand some things about my own relation to this category. But there are other reasons as well. As both the targeted, racialized group in United States immigration policy and yet the least "colored" group in racial debates, Asian Americans offer a charged site where American nationhood invests much of its contradictions, desires, and anxieties. While Asian American history (especially, though by no means exclusively, in California) carries a tremendous reservoir of denigration and abuse, that history occupies a less pronounced place in American consciousness than does African American suffering.⁵² This has to do with several facts: the lack of Asian American political mass in contrast to

African Americans; the specific history of racism directed against Asian immigrants and Asian labor (that is, the different history of economic competition with the white labor class); the difference between immigrant and slave relations to American nationality; and the strange status of "Asians" in American conceptions of race, which is predominantly understood as black and white. Racism against Asians and Asian Americans has been heavily filtered through the nineteenth-century European inheritance of Orientalism and its publicity, as well as through an elision in the black-and-white dyad that dominate American racial discourse. In their enormously popular treatise *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (1997), Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom, for example, specifically dismiss Asian Americans as a racialized group in America.⁵³ Quoting Gunnar Myrdal, who on the eve of World War II compared Asian Americans with African Americans in their status as an "unassimilable caste," the Thernstroms go on to claim that Myrdal's pronouncement is no longer true, since Asian Americans have acquired spectacular economic and social mobility in recent decades. The authors write, "it is hard to find anyone who cares much what [Asian Americans'] 'race' is." One might wonder whether the Thernstroms considered the racialization of Asian Americans in American immigration and legal history or if they paid attention to daily news. Furthermore, the disavowal of racism against Asian Americans because of their supposed economic and social success misses the point that economic competition often fuels the very energy behind racism, as well as intensifying conflict with other minority groups.

With black and white as the dominant racial categories, historical memory tends to overlook the fierce contestation over the shades, as it were, in between—conflicts that involve not just ideological differences but economic and social privileges. Indeed, the formulation of the government's sovereign power to exclude is historically tied to the definitions of aliens and citizens.⁵⁴ Well before *Brown*, there was a series of key rulings in school segregation, in addition to the well-known *Plessy v. Ferguson*, that involved the problem of racializing Asians in this country. In 1929, Chinese immigrant descendants in the Mississippi Delta, having for some time socialized with and even married blacks, nonetheless came into fierce protest around the issue of where the Chinese should be slotted in the Jim Crow school system, culminating in *Gong Lum v. Rice*.⁵⁵ (In that case, the Chinese appellants claimed that since they were clearly not black, they should be considered closer to being white.) During the *Brown* litigations, the constitutionality of racialization-as-segregation in the form of Japanese internment (*Korematsu v. U.S.*) was relegitimized on the grounds that "national security" was at stake.⁵⁶ (In Arthur Dong's documentary about traveling Asian American performers in the forties and fifties, there were poignant testimonies of Asian American performers who, after traveling long distances, could not find a

bathroom, since "black" and "white" were the only options proffered.) The question of the racialization of Asian Americans is in some ways more apparently melancholic than that of African Americans in American history in the sense that the history of virulent racism directed against Asians and Asian Americans has been at once consistently upheld and denied. Shutting between "black" and "white"—the Scylla and Charybdis between which all American immigrants have had to "pass"—Asian Americans occupy a truly ghostly position in the story of American racialization.

The formation of modern America in the early twentieth century is deeply and particularly attached to the fantasm of the "East." In her seminal work *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe has proposed that "Asia"—both within and outside of America—has always been a complex site on which the manifold anxieties of the American nation-state have been figured.

History and materially, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Asian Indians, and Filipino immigrants have played absolutely crucial roles in the building and sustaining of America; and at certain times, these immigrants have been fundamental to the construction of the nation as a simulacrum of inclusiveness. Yet the project of imagining the nation as homogenous requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come as fundamentally "foreign" origins antipathetic to the modern American society that "discovers," "welcomes," and "domesticates" them.⁵⁷

An analysis of the racialization of Asian Americans, in addition to African Americans, thus remains crucial to understanding the project of nation-making in the United States. In the background of—and at times as the foil to—the black civil rights struggles gripping this country, Asian Americans have come to occupy a curious place in the American racial imaginary, embodying both delight and repugnance.⁵⁸ I am thinking, for example, of the notion of the "model minority," the figure who has not only assimilated but also euphorically sings the praises of the American way. (I discuss a particularly extravagant version of this in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song* in chapter 2). The very history of Asian immigration (itself far from homogenous) has often been solicited to inflect, on the part of the Asian immigrant, a manic relation to the American Dream. This strain of Asian euphoria in America in turns serves to contain the history of Asian abjection, as well as to discipline other racialized groups in America. Thus, from African American to Asian American, narratives of sorrow and joy alike encode the yearning and mourning associated with the histories of dispersal and the remembrance of unspoken losses.

An understanding of melancholia as experienced by the raced subject must extend beyond a superficial or merely affective description of sadness to a deep sense of how that sadness—as a kind of ambulatory despair or

manic euphoria—conditions life for the disenfranchised and, indeed, constitutes their identity and shapes their subjectivity. From the theater of Rodgers and Hammerstein to that of David Henry Hwang, from the novel of Maxine Hong Kingston to that of Ralph Ellison, from the experimental work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha to that of Anna Deavere Smith, the rest of this study builds on and explores the manifestations and vicissitudes of racial melancholia for Asian American and African American subjects. When we begin to exhume, as Morrison proposes, the buried body in the heart of the American literature, we see that the nature of the “presence” uncovered is overlaid with political, intellectual, psychological, and ethical significations. The crypt reveals not *an object*, nor a whole subject prior to defilement, but the morphology of ghostliness itself. This study will demonstrate that comprehending this morphology will alter some of our most basic assumptions about a series of terms, such as *citizenship, assimilation, fantasy, trauma, and performance*.

Race and Psychoanalysis

To see racial identity as a melancholic formation is to apprehend that identity's instability and its indebtedness to the dis-identity it is also claiming. If race and ethnic studies grew out of the civil rights movement and remains affiliated with political activism, to question the grounds of identity can be seen as either a luxury, or worse, irresponsible. Yet, as I have argued in this chapter, to maintain a series of binary views that bar identity from dis-identity, injury from strength, and politics from aesthetics is to limit with detrimental consequences our understanding of racial grief as the result of (and as an agent in shaping) a complex interaction between sociality and psycho dynamics. The next generation of race scholars has to address the fundamental paradox at the heart of minority discourse: how to proceed once we acknowledge, as we must, that “identity” is the very ground upon which both progress and discrimination are made. What may be uneasy for some to entertain is the possibility that the future of ethnic studies may take a form very different from its original inception. New lines of inquiry may even appear antagonistic to (even as they are indebted to) the political activism that founded ethnic studies. The tension between politicized scholarship and scholarship that is political has long plagued the more established discipline of African American studies. In 1987, Barbara Christian and Henry Louis Gates could be found debating in *Critical Inquiry* the ability and inability of “high” critical theory to address racialized subjects and literary products. More than a decade later, a similar debate can be found—this time on the front page of the Arts and Leisure section of the *New York Times* between Henry Louis Gates and Manning Marable.⁵⁹

I am always troubled by this divide between “theory” and “politics.” On the one hand, I understand that theorization is often taken to be an indulgence, because its practice may produce ambiguities and instabilities that seem antithetical to the demands of political necessity. This is especially true for psychoanalytic modes of inquiry; as Max Weber writes in the first pages of *Economy and Society*, “You cannot call up the subjective dimension and keep it in place.” (This is also why Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s characterization of the double impulses of “extravagance” versus “necessity” in the production and critical practices of Asian American literature so powerfully encapsulates the fundamental double bind between political exigency and private imagination at the heart of any ethnic-racial work of art.) Hence I see my study as finally an intellectual project and, as such, not a political manual. On the other hand, I am convinced that the work of interrogating and unlocking the complexities of racial dynamics, realized in both institutionalized and psychical processes, must finally *inform* the direction of long-term political reimagining. What would it mean *not* to look at the subjective dimension of race for fear of its unwieldiness?

I suggest that it is often precisely at the most unmanageable instances of political mediation that we begin to understand the impact of racial allegiance and repudiation. It is when we press against the most intense points of political discomfort that we see what it really means to adopt a political stance. This study does not claim to have a *solution* to “the race question”; instead, it investigates the assumptions underlying the very notion of a solution. We do not know yet what it means for politics to accommodate a concept of identity based on constitutive loss or for politics to explore the psychic and social anchoring points that keep us chained to the oppressive, wounding memories of love and hate that condition the mutual enmeshment of the “dominant” and the “disempowered.” To refuse to contemplate these aspects of racial dynamics, however, has not been productive either, as is evidenced by the ongoing national drama of racial repudiation and reprisal.

What has been missing in much of the critical analysis of race relations and representations has been a willingness to confront the psychic implications of the haunting negativity that has not only been attached to but has also helped to constitute the very category of “the racialized.” The truth is that race studies still turns with more comfort to sociology, anthropology, and history rather than literature or philosophy. This discomfort has everything to do with an abiding attachment to the notion that we have to talk about racial subjects as “real” subjects. This tendency is not hard to understand, since dehumanization has long been the tool of discrimination. The problem, however, is that in trying to compensate for that history, we often sacrifice discussions of all the immaterial, pressing, unquantifiable elements that go into the making of “reality” and end up with a very narrow definition of what

constitutes "material" history. Similarly, this attachment gets reproduced at the level of methodology, where "material analysis" comes to take precedence and legitimacy over other, supposedly more ephemeral or quietist analytical tools. This study argues that we have to reconceptualize not only the subject and object of race studies but also the methodology.

In trying to nuance the notion of identity, some critics have turned to a discourse of multiplicity and hybridity. While both concepts contribute to complicating assumptions of subjective integrity, their evocations have also led to another form of nomination whereby identity becomes multiple and serialized without addressing the fundamental processes of identification. Lisa Lowe's important essay, entitled "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Difference,"⁶⁰ highlights both the urgency and the limitation of positing heterogeneity and hybridity as safeguards against essentialism in the formations of racial and disciplinary categories. Echoing Gayatri Spivak's notion of a "strategic essentialism," Lowe writes:

I argue for the Asian American necessity—politically, intellectually, and personally—to organize, resist, and theorize *as Asian Americans*, but at the same time I inscribe this necessity within a discussion of the risks of a cultural politics that relies upon the construction of sameness and the exclusion of difference. (68; my emphasis)

But how does this balancing act really work? The idea, while lucid on a political level, is less so on a subjective level. It cannot address the complexity of identification as a psychical process. In short, beyond the strategic issue lies the psychical issue: What are the conditions and expenses for supporting such double consciousness?

I cannot but wonder if an illusory opposition has been established between hybridity and essentialism, as though the former cures the latter; as though differences of class, gender, and nationality eliminate essentialist positions when clearly those different positions are themselves each effecting their own brands of allegiances, each demanding "an" identity. When we turn to Lowe's analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior*, we see the kind of question that remains to be explored:

[T]he making of Asian American culture may be a much "messier" process than unmediated vertical transmission from one generation to another, including practices that are partly inherited and partly modified, as well as partly invented . . .

[Kingston] asks: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family . . . from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (65; my emphasis)

Lowe reminds us that "Chinatown" and "Chinese American culture" are themselves the very emblems "of shifting demographics, languages, and populations" (65). I want to focus attention, however, on that part of Asian American culture that Lowe calls "partly invented." To arrive at that "partly invented" seems to involve a different set of inquiries than a question of negotiating either strategic self-positioning or false homogenization and has much more to do with the problematics surrounding self-identification, the desire for such fiction, and the longing for the alibi of a genealogy not always available.

In the Kingston passage to which Lowe alludes, the narrator addresses the entanglement between private and public desires and, by extension, between personal and public self-representations. In the line "What is Chinese tradition; what is the movies?" Kingston questions precisely the possibility of maintaining a lucid, delineated identity when subjectivity as a discrete realm has been fundamentally compromised. We are viscerally reminded that the deconstruction (as "in taking apart") of the "composition of differences" (i.e., "class, gender, national diversities"), while crucial, remains insufficient to understanding how the process of identification is itself always already generating difference and sameness. The psyche has its own systems of heterogeneity, and we ought to ask: What are the ontological conditions under which "identify" can takes place? We are so often afraid in academia to talk about ontology, for fear of essentialism, universalism, or intellectual quietism. Yet sometimes the stringent fear of essentialism or essentialist labels prevents certain categories from being discussed, categories that, for all their inherent instability, nevertheless operate in powerful, fantasmatic ways.

A key term to mediate the relation between sociality and ontology must be *fantasy*, the very stuff of the "partly invented."⁶¹ In a way, we can read the Kingston narrator's dilemma as a metaquestion about our methodology: how do we separate ontic and familial "selves" (an assumption and a preoccupation inherited from psychoanalysis) from the subject positions invented by society, culture, and politics? In fact, the very inability to tell the difference informs us that social and psychical cathexes work in collaboration. Social forms of compulsion and oppression may have their hold precisely because they mime or invoke ontic modes of identification.

If one of the sealing elements of American democracy—as well as that which threatens to undo it—is the process of racialization, then the nature of racial fantasy and of racial melancholia must surely alter how we conceive of ethics and politics. It is along these lines that psychoanalysis could illuminate the race question: not insofar as it elucidates private desires and psychology, but because psychoanalysis understands those private desires to be enmeshed in social relations. My use of psychoanalysis, to the purists, will most likely appear idiosyncratic. I do not deploy psychoanalysis as a

diagnostic tool or as a prescription for universal psychological or familial development. I agree with Hortense Spillers who considers the Freudian Oedipal drama of the nuclear family to be an insufficient model for addressing those "occupied or captive persons and communities in which the rites and rights of gender function have been exploded historically."⁶² I do, however, find in psychoanalytic thinking a powerful vocabulary for addressing that component of racial identification that is imaginatively supported, at once brash and elegiac.

There are currently several models for formulating psychoanalysis as a politically viable tool.⁶³ One approach comes from uncovering the socio-historical roots of psychoanalysis, whether it be an analysis of the development of psychoanalysis itself as a cultural history beginning in anti-Semitic Austria (Sander L. Gilman), a reading of class dynamics inhering in the psychoanalytic treatment (Jane Gallop on Dora), or a contextualization of Freud's work within the inheritances of nineteenth century imperialism and the colonial imagination (Mary Ann Doane). Yet another strategy is to subvert the terms within psychoanalysis by feminists interested in retrieving psychoanalysis as a productive tool (Jane Gallop on Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray and the school of *l'écriture féminine*, Spiller on incest, Tate on the Oedipal drama.)

These forms of intervention through psychoanalysis, however, still do not answer why we turn to psychoanalysis at all. One can reveal the social constituents or internal contradictions or hidden ideological suppositions of psychoanalysis itself, but why do we turn to that paradigm at all? This book hopes to begin a conversation about not why we *can* use psychoanalysis but why we *already do*. That is, as shown from Brown to Ellison and Morrison, the politics of race has always spoken in the language of psychology. The lesson of psychoanalysis speaks above all to the possibility that *intr subjectivity exists as a form of intersubjectivity* and that *intersubjectivity often speaks in the voice of intrasubjectivity*: a mutually supportive system.⁶⁴ A progressive politics that does not recognize the place of subjective complicity can only be shortsighted.

Far from inscribing essentialism, psychoanalytic thinking recognizes essentialism as but a *guise* of subjectivity. The psychoanalytic subject is universal only insofar as it posits every subjective being as *historical beings*, embedded in time, family, and sociality. In her introduction to *Supposing the Subject*, Joan Copjec warns against the shortsightedness of seeing history as antithetical to the purviews of psychoanalysis.⁶⁵ She points out that history conceived linearly is truly ahistorical, while the psychoanalytic perspective teaches us to be attentive to the disjunctive and retroactive hauntedness of history—and, I might add, of the haunted of that history within the subject.⁶⁶ We should not conflate a haunted history with nonspecificity; on the contrary, haunted history alerts us to *context*. And it is from within this attention to

contexts that we might be able to begin to reenvision a politics attuned to the reality of grief in all its material and immaterial evidence.

By looking at racial formation under the rubric of melancholia, this investigation generates a series of critical terms to address the repercussions of loss, fantasy, and mourning in American racial history. The goal is to forge a vocabulary with which to talk about subjective states vis-à-vis a racial geography beyond the immediate demands of advocacy. It is my hope that this study of racial melancholia will resist the closure of categories that we imagine to be vital to political conduct. If we are willing to listen, the history of disarticulated grief is still speaking through the living, and the future of social transformation depends on how open we are to facing the intricacies and paradoxes of that grief and the passions that it bequeaths.