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Genograms: Family History and Transnational Adoption Through Asian American Psychoanalysis

David Eng and Shinhee Han's *A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia* presents a framework for understanding psychological developments specific to Asian Americans. Eng and Han introduce a revised, racialized version of Freud's theories on mourning and melancholia, and apply them to the Asian American experience in assimilating into white American society. The model proposes that, because full assimilation into American society is unattainable (due to the perception of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners), the Asian American psyche is in a constant state of flux between mourning the loss of whiteness and assimilation, and remaining in a state of melancholy, which, previously thought of by Freud to be a pathology, is de-pathologized in the article and is re-established as a normal emotional process accompanying Asian American immigration and assimilation.

Another one of Eng and Han's articles, *Desegregating Love: Transnational Adoption, Racial Reparation, and Racial Transitional Objects,* provides an additional lens for understanding psychological processes specific to Asian adoptees. Here, another kind of phenomenon is examined, one in which the adoptee unconsciously longs for the

birth country and the birth mother, and where racialized objects are sorted into good and bad categories. In this model, psychological healing occurs when the adoptee uses a racial transitional object. Eng and Han describe transitional spaces as "[permitting] the psyche to negotiate what were previously felt to be mutually exclusive options: inside-outside, subjectivity-objectivity, unity-separation" (Eng and Han, *Desegregating Love* 163). Thus, a racial transitional object can be a literal object, or a person that helps in resolving an internal good-bad dichotomy within the psyche.

These psychological developments particular to the Asian American immigration and adoption experience are difficult to apply to the history of my family, and apply more appropriately to my sister and me. We were both adopted from separate biological families, and are the only ethnically Chinese members of the family lineage. Josey and I were brought to the United States when we were ten and nine months old, respectively. Our adoptive family is comprised of white Euro-Americans, and there exists no information on our biological backgrounds. Thus, I use the psychological frameworks presented in Eng and Han's articles to analyze our psychological developments, and how they influence our relationships to our parents, grandparents, and intergenerational patterns that exist within our family. This paper does not examine my white grandparents' immigration and assimilation process through an Asian American psychological lens in a top-down process. Rather, my analysis is a bottom-up process, which begins with my psychological development as a Chinese adoptee in the United States, and explores how my identity shapes my relationships to my parents, grandparents, and defines how I (and my sister) fit into generational trends and the broader familial fabric.

I will start by exploring how my identity as a Chinese adoptee in a white adoptive family influences my psychological development, with respect to the models presented in Eng and Han's articles on racial mourning, melancholia, and adoption. My parents and grandparents exist in American society as white, and yet Josey and I exist in American society as Chinese. Unlike the rest of our family, we experience micro-aggressions specific to the Asian American experience, and in addition we field questions having to do with our visible adoption. Eng and Han's explanation, that:

> "the transnational adoptee disrupts the aesthetic continuity of the white nuclear family. She cannot pass, and her presence draws attention not only to her racial difference but also to the fact of her adoption" (Eng and Han, *Desegregating Love* 155)

speaks to the everyday experience of existing as an adopted child, as a biologically and racially separate figure from the rest of the family. My position as a Chinese member in a white family is symbolic and indicative of the broader challenge I face in relation to American society, in which white is ideal and expected. In both society and the family, complete assimilation is unattainable. This failed assimilation process produces in me an unconscious longing for whiteness, and by virtue, full integration into American society (and into our adoptive family), a process that our Euro-American parents and grandparents, unlike us, were able to complete.

At the same time that I experience a longing for whiteness, I experience a separate and unconscious longing for the Chinese biological parents, for the Chinese history and culture that was lost with my transition to the United States. My sister and I were raised by and as white Americans, and yet, due to our ethnic status, can never fully assimilate. Additionally, it is too late to be reabsorbed into Chinese national culture; if we tried, we would also be approaching Chinese culture as foreigners. In other words, we are white,

but not quite, and we are also Chinese, but not quite. We remain in an in-between state, in the crossfire of mourning and being melancholic for whiteness, and mourning and being melancholic for Chineseness.

The general attitude towards adoption in the family is an (unintentional) erasure of the different psychological struggles specific to adoptees. With the best intentions, my parents emphasized the idea that Josey and I are no different from other children in biologically connected families. This erasure colored, and continues to color, many of my behaviors in navigating my identity as an adopted Chinese child, especially in how I relate and aspire to whiteness and traditional American ideals. Because I was raised to believe that adoption was no different than biological processes, I would grow confused when people treated adoption like a visible phenomenon, or worse, an anomaly. I felt excluded from the white, biologically connected American family ideal, and yet I also did not have a Chinese alternative to turn to. Josey, adopted five years after me, has a greater exposure to Chineseness, and is more open about her status as a Chinese adoptee. I am less comfortable when confronted with the possibility of being different, which points to a deeper psychological feeling of racial mourning and a longing for whiteness. These feelings may have been exacerbated by my homogenous white upbringing. Despite being raised in a diverse city, I was exposed to media in which I never saw my race represented, and attended a mostly white school in which my grade had only three students of color. By being surrounded by so much whiteness, in many ways I shared Mina's experience: "although she has an 'Asian face' she nevertheless feels 'white'" (Eng and Han, *Desegregating Love* 152).

Eng and Han propose that "psychic health for the transnational adoptee involves creating space in her psyche for two 'good-enough' mothers – the Korean birthmother and the white adoptive mother" (Eng and Han, *Desegregating Love* 143). In other words, psychological reparation comes from a reconciliation of two conflicting racial objects in the form of a racial transitional object. In applying this psychoanalytic theory to my predicament, those racialized objects are an idealized whiteness and an intentionally unacknowledged, or repressed, Chineseness. While Mina uses her psychotherapist as a racial transitional object, I lack a similar figure. However, if I examine myself through the theory of transitional objects, specifically Eng and Han's proposal that "the domains of play, artistic creativity, religious feeling, and dreaming become those privileged zones of transitional space wherein recurring burdens of reality are negotiated throughout a person's adult life" (Eng and Han, *Desegregating Love* 164), I realize that I may attempt to use the arts to cope with my adoption, specifically writing and drawing, even if adoption is not an explicit subject in my work. More explicitly, and perhaps more similar to the parable of Mina's ducks, I use the video game *The Sims* to unconsciously work out frustrations. I recall spending hours on the computer creating white families who biologically produce white children, who in turn biologically white children of their own. Whiteness was never a conscious intention, but a default. When I look back, especially keeping Mina's case study in mind, I realize that *The Sims* served as a coping mechanism, an attempt to access the longed for ideal of the white American biologically connected family, the aesthetically undisrupted continuity of whiteness. Unlike the healing racial transitional figure afforded Mina, however, I don't believe that this simulated video game behavior has lead, or does lead, to racial reparation. Instead, it is a

reinforcement of idealizing whiteness. Unlike Mina, I lack a figure that encompasses the discrepancies I feel within myself regarding idealized whiteness and repressed Chineseness.

In contrast, my sister (who is a dancer and who, unlike me, has been raised with and attends school with other Chinese and Chinese adopted friends) comes closer to acquiring a healing racial transitional object, or at least comes closer to racial reparation. Examining Josey through Eng and Han's article, I notice that she does not "[struggle] with these issues in social and psychic isolation" (Eng and Han, *Desegregating Love* 142), at least not to the extent that I have. She has instead has grown up in solidarity and friendship with other Chinese adoptees and seems to retain a healthier and more open attitude towards her identity.

Having analyzed our separate ways of dealing with our identities as Chinese adoptees, and exploring how racial melancholia and white assimilation affect us differently, I now step back to my parents' and grandparents' generations, and analyze my (and Josey's) position in the family line and how, specifically, we fit in with the emotional (instead of biological) continuity of family patterns. Since I find it difficult to analyze previous generations of the family through Asian American psychological frameworks, I will broaden the theme and explore the tension of the white, biological, and ethnically homogenous American family between less self-contained families (in which interracial and intercultural marriages occur), and how my and Josey's interracial adoptions may unconsciously dictate our attitudes towards different sides of the family.

Grandfather Stanley, on my father's side of the family, was first-generation Russian Jewish, born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He experienced a great

deal of anti-Semitism in his town, to the point where he was frequently beat up. He grew up in a household in which the culture and values of his native country were kept and enforced, and in which physical discipline from his parents was normalized. This dynamic would, in turn, account for my grandfather's cold and aggressive relationship to my father. The oppression he faced as Russian Jewish perhaps unconsciously enforced a desire for self-containment within the family, for cultural and religious homogeneity as a stance of solidarity against anti-Semitism, not unlike the common Asian American family dynamic described by Akiyama: "marrying outside their Asian race was even seen as a violation of one's political commitment to fighting racism for all Asian ethnics (Kibria, 1997)" (Akiyama, 6).

My father, Steve, was also born and raised in a homogenous, self-contained family with a cohesive cultural and religious identity, though his experience as a second generation Russian Jewish person was much easier in terms of discrimination. He was raised in a mainly Jewish and wealthy neighborhood in Pennsylvania, and unlike my grandfather, never felt endangered because of the ethnic, cultural and religious homogeneity of his hometown. In many ways, the trend of becoming more assimilated into American society with each successive generation proved successful on my father's side of the family. His family history fulfills "the popular American myth of immigration, assimilation, and the melting pot for dominant white ethnic groups" (Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia* 671), while also successfully and without struggle keeping Jewish identity part of the family makeup. This progression was ultimately disrupted by my father's marriage to my non-Jewish mother (who also refused to convert), which in many ways has and continues to be a source of struggle in their marriage. My parents' union

presented a challenge to his collective family identity, and especially displeased my grandfather Stanley. As a result, my mother suffered years (and continues to suffer) from a sense of emotional isolation and ostracization from my father's side of the family. My and Josey's strong emotional bond to our mother may not only be an unconscious idealization of the good racialized white object, but also an unconscious posture of solidarity in feeling shut out of an ethnic, religious, and cultural uniformity of family.

My grandmother Bridget, on my mother's side, was born in Scotland and is ethnically Irish, raised as Irish Catholic. She came to the United States when she was five years old. Like grandfather Stanley, she grew up experiencing discrimination and xenophobia because of her status as a non-American. However, this dynamic failed to shape a desire for solidarity with other Irish Catholics. She stopped practicing her religion due to negative experiences that turned her away from Catholicism, and, unlike my grandfather Stanley, married someone of a different religious and cultural background (my grandfather Richard). This interreligious and intercultural marriage perhaps unconsciously went on to define my mother and her siblings' attitudes towards cultural, religious, and ethnic self-containment. Among the children that my grandparents had on my mother's side, two married interracially, which resulted in biracial cousins (one with whom I'm especially close). There is also a diversity of religious attitudes and sexual orientation amongst my mother's siblings. In short, my mother's side of the family lacks a cohesive ethnic, cultural, and religious family identity. Naturally, the marriage between my mother and father was well received by my mother's parents.

In many ways, my father was more revolutionary in terms of breaking family patterns; he is the only member of his immediate family to instigate a disruption from the

Jewish continuity of his family (by choosing to marry a non-Jewish woman who refused to convert, and by adopting a child rather than biologically producing one, he ceases to produce ethnically, culturally, or religiously Jewish children).

If I analyze this vertical family pattern, there is a trend of moving farther and farther away from the American ideal of a uniform and biologically connected family, first by my father's disruption of Jewish continuity, and second by my (and Josey's) disruption of the biological continuity. One familial development that particularly stands out is my and Josey's feelings towards our mother and her side of the family in contrast to our father's. I find that Josey and I feel a much stronger bond and greater connection to our mother's siblings and parents, in contrast to a (perhaps at first glance) unfounded aversion and lack of warmth towards our father's side of the family.

If I analyze this dynamic through the psychological framework of racial melancholia, the cultural, ethnic, and religious uniformity of my father's side of the family becomes a lost object that is unattainable for my sister and me. In a sense, our father's family and its self-contained Jewish identity is a stand-in for our lost sense of Chinese family and cultural solidarity that we would have had, had we stayed with and been raised by our biological families. However, rather than consciously long for or idealize the traditional and culturally contained aspect of my father's side of the family, we retain an ambivalence or even slight aversion towards it.

I return to analyze generational dynamics through the Asian American psychological model of transitional objects, in regards to my having a Persian Jewish boyfriend. Considering the role that culture and tradition (or lack thereof) has played in my parents' marriage, my relationship to Adam is perhaps an attempt to reconcile

unconscious psychological feelings towards my father's side of the family, and by virtue, the idea of a culturally and ethnically uniform family (that Adam possesses in likeness to my father's background, as well my lost Chinese background). A slightly revised version of the racial transitional object framework is put in place: in the absence of a racialized healing transitional object, I take my Persian Jewish boyfriend as a deracialized transitional object. He represents a reconciliation: not of idealized whiteness with repressed Chineseness, but of the "good" biological/cultural/religious/ethnic uniformity (that I was unable to reconcile with my father's side of the family) and the "bad" de-traditionalized, "mixed-bag" aspect of my mother's side of the family (my mother and boyfriend have many positive qualities in common, and thus he is able to stand in for her family).

Through analyzing family patterns over three generations (while keeping in mind psychological models specific to the Asian American immigration, acculturation, and adoptive processes), I was able to pinpoint a generational trend towards desegregation, as well as intergenerational parallels. My and Josey's adoption disrupts biological and assimilative continuity in our immediate family, and similarly, our parents' marriage disrupts a religious and cultural continuity in our father's family. The parallel between these two dynamics gives rise to several familial developments: first, a posture of greater solidarity with our mother, whose social exclusion from our father's family echoes our unconscious mourning for an unattainable whiteness, and for an unattainable uniformity of family. Second, the parallel between my mother's exclusion from my father's family and our feelings of exclusion from white American society allows me to seek out a healing transitional object that enables me to reconcile a uniform cultural and biological

(Jewish as a stand-in for Chinese) identity, in the absence of a transitional object that deals directly with the dichotomy of whiteness and Chineseness. Psychoanalysis of family patterns and history lend a great understanding in how to prevent similar problems and dynamics from arising later, and provide greater guidance in how to heal unresolved family traumas and unhealthy dynamics.

Works Cited

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