

EMBODIMENT AND AGENCY



Edited by

SUE CAMPBELL, LETITIA MEYNELL,
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RACIAL GRIEF AND MELANCHOLIC AGENCY

Angela Failler

This paper reflects on how the relationship between embodiment and agency might be illuminated through developments in psychoanalytic theory on racialization and racism. A recent interdisciplinary study by Anne Anlin Cheng (2000) titled *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* serves as the primary example toward this aim. Ultimately, an argument is made for the value of a psychoanalytic approach that highlights the less visible or less tangible workings of racial identity, workings that historicist and poststructuralist accounts obscure in their focus on the body and its markers as material or discursive effects. In other words, this paper insists on acknowledging the ways in which unconscious meanings that are produced in relation to experiences of embodiment play a key role in shaping possibilities for agency.

Although psychoanalysis is perhaps best known for understanding embodiment through the axis of sexual difference, numerous efforts have been made to bring psychoanalysis to bear upon questions of "race" and racial difference. These efforts include explorations of racial identification (e.g., Fuss 1995; Cheng 2000; Eng and Han 2003), internal motivations for racial prejudice (e.g., Fanon 1952; Allport 1954; Young-Bruehl 1996), broader patterns of race relations and ethnic hatred (e.g., Freud 1930/1978; Žižek 1998), constructions of race (including whiteness) in forms of cultural representation such as film and literature (e.g., Pellegrini 1996; Johnson 1998; Tate 1998), constructions of race within the discourse and practice of psychoanalysis itself (e.g., Shepherdson 1998; Seshadri-Crooks 2000; Brickman 2003), and the possibility that recognizing racial identification as central to the formation of sexual subjectivity requires the revision of some of psychoanalytic theory's basic tenets (e.g., Abel et al. 1997; Eng 2001; Walton 2001). Such efforts make use of the attention of

psychoanalysis to unconscious desires and fantasies of the self in relation to others, while simultaneously challenging the primacy of sexual difference as *the* organizing principle in our experiences of embodiment and relationality.

Building on the accomplishments of this work, my paper poses a specific question: what are the implications of psychoanalytic accounts of racialization and racism for conceptualizing the relationship between embodiment and agency? Or, how might possibilities for conceptualizing agency be opened up through a psychoanalytic reading of embodiment and racial identification? In posing these questions, I first want to suggest that agency conceived of within a psychoanalytic framework picks up where agency conceived of in a sociopolitical framework leaves off. That is, where agency in much social and political theory is seen as contingent on an individual's access to and recognition by formal, institutional structures whereby he or she is granted the freedom to exert willful, self-conscious action, psychoanalysis would argue that the "freedom" implied in agency is contingent on unconscious structures and nonrational activity as well. Christopher Lane (1998) makes this distinction, observing that "political and psychical liberation are nonidentical" as, for example, "a country's independence from colonial rule does not in any simple way translate into freedom for its citizens" (4). Lane's example not only points to the inability of formal equality or liberation to unequivocally guarantee substantive changes in people's daily lives, but to the reality that people do not simply or easily let go of *feeling* the effects of having been colonized. Put differently, even once officially "freed," people do not automatically shed their identifications with the subordinate positions they previously held.

Similarly, the complex process of racialization cannot be explained by a theory of socialization that posits the raced subject as the outcome of cultural-discursive practices and historical-material conditions alone (a theory that seems to offer little potential for agency, particularly if the subject already has limited access to the legitimizations of official or discursive power). Psychoanalysis would suggest, instead, that racialization is simultaneously achieved through the ways in which we become *imaginatively* attached to fantasies that organize meanings of racial identity and physical markers of race. In this sense, to borrow again from Lane, individuals cannot be considered "simply the imprint of their national and symbolic structures" (Lane 1998, 3-4). It is more accurate to say, rather, that symbolic structures intermingle with and are intersected by psychical structures in the formation of our racial identifications, and that it is precisely at these intersections where negotiations of agency occur.

Psychoanalysis is not being offered up in this paper as a corrective to sociological, historicist, or poststructuralist accounts of race, but rather as a supplement that attends specifically to the less palpable, interior projections of racialization and embodiment. My distinction between these different approaches, then, does not suggest their incompatibility but just the opposite: there is an interimplication between psychical life and social life that makes working at the nexus of psychoanalytic theory and cultural theory especially fecund; that is, reading psychical life as it is implicated both in and by sociopolitical life allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the relationship between embodiment and agency than a focus on either psychical life or sociopolitical life might on its own. This methodological strategy adheres to Shoshana Felman's (1987) well-known distinction between *implication* and *application* in bringing psychoanalysis to bear on phenomena in social research. Felman argues that thinking in terms of implication in this context helps to avoid the kind of reductive, unidirectional cause-and-effect formulations that a straightforward application of theory-to-object tends to promote (49).

Cheng's (2000) study *The Melancholy of Race* is an effective example of theoretical interimplication as she considers how psychical dynamics of race are integral to the historicity of race and vice versa. In particular, she responds to the problem of how to think about agency for minoritized subjects; for while minoritized subjects suffer from specific losses or injuries within a systematically racist and sexist culture, they also actively participate in the construction of their own identities and the racialized/gendered categories they inhabit. This problem has been raised elsewhere by feminist theorists including Wendy Brown (1995, 2001) and Patricia Elliot (1991), who are wary of efforts that seek retribution for disenfranchised persons by way of establishing their victimhood or powerlessness as a basis for politics. Such efforts, they maintain, reinforce the so-called victim's status as a non-agent, and eclipse experiences, including emotional or psychical affect, that may *not* reflect total powerlessness. By paying attention to how race is negotiated psychically, that is, in giving a theory of racial subjectivity not entirely determined by social or political apparatus, Cheng offers a different view for agency amid ongoing legacies of colonialism and racism. Further, by paying attention to how race and the racialized body become meaningful not only through social or public discourses of race but also in how the psyche assigns meaning to the body and its experiences, she locates the potential for agency beyond formal avenues of grievance in the imaginative space between the psyche-soma and the social where both racial grief and racial identifications are played out.

Extending Freud's concept of melancholy into an analysis of racial identification and race relations, Cheng argues that racial identity in contemporary America is underpinned by internalized loss or "hidden grief" for both the dominant white culture and racialized others. By shifting melancholy from a strictly psychical concept to one that implicates the circulation of power in the broader context of the social, she manages the difficult task of understanding psychical life as always, already influenced by social life, and vice versa. Moreover, by suggesting that *both* dominance and otherness come at a loss, she calls into question the simplistic division between power and powerlessness in race relations (Cheng 2000, xi)—a move that is crucial for reenvisioning possibilities for agency.

Critical of understanding racialization as simply the imposition or inscription of social meaning onto docile bodies, Cheng is interested instead in how racial categories are imaginatively supported; that is, how we as individuals become attached to the racial identities we occupy, and how these attachments, in turn, are expressed in cultures of race relations. For Cheng, our attachments to racial identities and our relationships to (racial) others are mediated by the dynamics of loss and identification. Psychoanalytically speaking, identification is an internal or unconscious response to the loss of a beloved object (potentially a person, idea, or thing). According to Freud in his account of melancholia, when the pain of losing a beloved object is unbearable, the ego, in an attempt to cover over or compensate for its wound, sets up an identification with that object, retaining it inside, as it were, as co-existent with the self. He writes: "[by assuming] the features of the object, [the ego] is forcing itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and is trying to make good the id's loss by saying: 'Look, you can love me too—I am so like the object'" (Freud 1923/1978, 30). With the object turned inside or incorporated as such, the ego is able to postpone the painful recognition of its loss. The loss, in other words, is withdrawn from consciousness (Freud 1917/1978, 245). At the same time, however, the process of mourning is stalled, since with the lost object now buried within the self, it cannot be let go. This is to say that in melancholy the bereaved has trouble moving on to establish meaningful attachments to new, available objects. Instead, he or she remains psychically "stuck" to the lost one.

To complicate matters further, in melancholy the ego's relationship to the lost object is fraught with ambivalence: in its absence, the object is not only beloved and missed, but also felt to be abandoning and therefore hated. Hence, when the object is incorporated or taken inside, ambivalence, too, is turned inward, and feelings of hatred meant for the lost object become *self-reproaches*

in their place (Freud 1917/1978, 248). When the self comes to replace the lost object as the object of reproach in this way, the subject's own body becomes a site upon which this rejection is often reenacted. Put differently, the bereaved may invest his or her body with the ambivalence and hatred meant for the lost object as a way of sidestepping the psychological conflict or guilt resulting from hating what was also once loved. In this case, the body's meaning for the subject reflects not only the way in which bodies are assigned meaning culturally, but also how psychological negotiations with loss are "written on" or "worn by" the body (Grosz 1992, 38).

But how does melancholy shed light on the formation of racial identity and race relations, in particular? What is "lost" in the process of becoming a raced subject? How does race or racial embodiment, specifically, emerge as an expression of or compensation for loss in this context? And finally, where does the possibility for agency lie given this apparently stultifying dynamic?

In Cheng's account, the formation of racial identity in America is characterized by melancholy or internalized loss for both the dominant white culture and racial others—but differently so. For the dominant culture, she explains, white identity is secured through the simultaneous exclusion and consumption of racialized others. That is, while socially sanctioned practices such as racial profiling and segregation ensure that minorities and nonwhite immigrants never quite belong to the nation, the nation depends on possessing and exploiting these "others" to support its social and economic hierarchies, as well as its fantasies of itself as a multicultural, democratic state (Cheng 2000, 10). In order to retain these others both literally and imaginatively to feed America's ego, America must also refuse to acknowledge that it is indeed founded upon their use and abuse. Analogous to Freud's account of the melancholic individual who refuses to relinquish the (already lost) object in order to sustain a fantasy of him- or herself as unscathed by its loss, Cheng observes of the white nationalist ego that its "racist institutions . . . do not want to fully expel the racial other" (Cheng 2000, 12). That is, rather than excluding racial minorities altogether, they are retained for the purposes of propping up its white, capitalist authorities.

Further to this, and again analogous to Freud's account of melancholy wherein the reality of the object's loss is withdrawn from consciousness, Cheng suggests that the denial of nonwhite subjectivity is so deeply incorporated into white America's cultural imagination that it does not begin to recognize what is lost by way of its exploitive and degrading treatment of racial minorities. That is, while feeding off or consuming these "others" serves to nourish the

nation's ego on the one hand, on the other it proves impoverishing since, as one reviewer puts it, the "nation [is] thus deprived of some of the most vital energies of its citizens" (Johnson, 2006). However, this particular loss, America's loss of some of the most vital energies of its citizens, fails to be either recognized or articulated as a loss in the culture at large since, crucially, the exclusion and exploitation of minorities and immigrants is required to maintain existing hierarchies of power.

This melancholy dynamic of exclusion and consumption (loss and incorporation), along with its mechanisms of denial, obviously has implications for the formation of nonwhite subjectivity as well. For if the nonwhite other is the melancholic white culture's lost object—simultaneously excluded and consumed—the loss for this other is the impossibility of being an inviolable or unassailable subject (Cheng 2000, 175), that is, of living without the threat of exclusion and/or exploitation. Racial melancholy for the nonwhite other, then, functions as the internalization of this vulnerability to racial violence and, simultaneously, an identification with the (albeit unattainable) racial ideal of whiteness. Identifying with whiteness or the ideals of white America, in this case, serves as a kind of psychic "holding on" to the fantasy of inviolability, or to the desire of remaining intact despite its loss. In other words, for racial minorities, identifying with whiteness may preserve some sense of safety or fitting in.

By identifying with whiteness, however, the racial other is caught in a logic of assimilation whereby the pressure to measure up and the longing to belong continuously haunts his or her sense of self as a subject (Cheng 2000, 80–81). This haunting is made tortuously clear in Cheng's retelling of an unforgettable scene from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1975). In the scene, the story's protagonist-narrator verbally and physically attacks another young Chinese American girl in their school bathroom. Her own hurt feelings at not fitting in, of not being "American feminine" enough, are acted out as violent taunts and prods at this other girl whose physical features, in particular, become the target of the narrator's aggression:

I looked into her face so I could hate it up close. . . . She wore black bangs. . . . I thought I could put my thumb on her nose and push it bonelessly in, indent her face. . . work her face around like a dough. . . . I hated her weak neck. . . . I wished I was able to see what my neck looked like from the back and sides. I hoped it did not look like hers. . . . I grew

my hair long to hide it in case it was a flower-stem neck. I walked around to the front of her to hate her face some more. (Kingston 1975, 175–76)

What Cheng notes about this scene, in particular, is that the narrator's disgust at the other girl's body reveals an anxiety about her own, racialized body (2000, 74). That is, the narrator does not hate this girl's face or body dispassionately, but in a simultaneous recognition and denial of the fact that it resembles her own. By homing in on those features read stereotypically as Asian or Asian-feminine—a "boneless" nose, a "flower-stem" neck and, elsewhere in the scene, a "China doll hair cut" (Kingston 1975, 173)—the narrator projects onto the other girl a similar kind of racialized rejection or denigration that she describes elsewhere as having experienced herself.

Included in her exhaustive list of complaints about the other girl's physical embodiment (she hates the girl's "papery fingers," her pastel cardigan, the way she folds wax paper from her lunch bag, and "the wheezes that came out of her plastic flute" [Kingston 1975, 173–77]), the narrator is exasperated by her quietness. She has heard her talk outside of school, yet at school, we are told, the girl merely whispers, "as soft as if she had no muscles" (173). Infuriated by this sign of weakness, the narrator corners her in the empty bathroom one day after school, pinches her skin, pulls her hair, and screams at her, "Come on! Talk! Talk! Talk!" (180). The girl does not speak, however, expelling only tears, sobs, and snot. No words. The narrator, on the other hand, invokes the voice of white authority and assimilation, insisting that she is trying to help the girl to fit in by forcing her to speak American-like: "You don't see I'm trying to help you out, do you? Do you want to be like this, dumb (do you know what dumb means?), your whole life? Don't you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompom girl? . . . I'm doing this for your own good. . . . 'Talk' . . . 'Just say, 'yes,' or, 'O.K.," or, "Baby Ruth"' (Kingston 1975, 180–81). But still, she elicits no words.

The narrator's idealization of the cheerleader or pompom girl in this dialogue makes obvious the way in which identifying with patriotic white American femininity functions for her as a means of coping as a Chinese American girl in a masculinist, white nationalist context. In other words, identifying with the figure of the cheerleader allows her, at least in these moments in the bathroom, to *disidentify* with the designation of "other" and the social unpopularity or alienation attached to it. However, it also suggests, as Cheng points out, that "the denigrated body comes to voice . . . only by assuming the voice of authority" (Cheng 2000, 75). That is, only by identifying with or mimicking the very authoritative, racist structures that have designated both her and the other girl

who resembles her as abject subjects in the first place, does the narrator assume agency as a speaking subject. Put differently again, only by assuming the position of perpetrator in relation to this silent other does the narrator feel *unlike* a victim. Yet, in the end, torturing her did not help her fit in, nor did it allow the narrator to escape her own feelings of violability in the world beyond the bathroom. In fact, despite being the aggressor, the narrator suffers in this incident too, exposing the scene of racial bullying as simultaneously her own trauma: "I was getting dizzy from the air I was gulping. Her sobs and my sobs were bouncing wildly off the tile, sometimes together, sometimes alternating" (Kingston 1975, 181).

But what alternatives are there? That is, what other routes to agency are there for racially marginalized subjects that do not involve the taking in and acting out of assimilatory ideals? According to Cheng, one of the conditions that maintains the desirability and fantasy of assimilation for racial minorities is the failure of legal or formal procedures of grievance to exact reparation for injuries associated with histories of racist and colonial violence. Since the legal framework for grievance is based on "the promise of acquiring public recognition," she argues, it does not necessarily guarantee agency for the griever: to be recognized upon the grounds of racial injury means to be recognized as an "other," and thus is still to inhabit the position of object rather than subject (Cheng 2000, 174). At best, in other words, the recognition accorded racialized subjects via formal avenues of grievance is the status of victim.¹ But the status of victim, in turn, reinforces a view of racialized minorities as inherently wounded or injured and in need of a so-called legitimate authority (the state or the law) to bestow subjecthood upon them. Paradoxically, notes Cheng, the "gesture of granting agency through formal grievance confers agency on the one hand and rescinds it on the other" (Cheng 2000, 175). That is, previously denied agency is only "restored" to the racially injured plaintiff upon the condition that he or she reiterates his or her position as a violable being.²

Along with Cheng, political theorist Wendy Brown considers it a tricky strategy to use victimization as the basis for restoring agency to disenfranchised persons. Brown is concerned with both legal procedures of grievance and the efforts of identity-based political movements working on behalf of particular

1. At worst, however, as feminist cultural critic bell hooks notes in her essay "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination" (2000), grievances made by racial minorities often draw the accusation of "reverse-discrimination," effectively silencing attempts by people of color to articulate the experience of being terrorized by whites/whiteness (176).

2. And at the same time, by this gesture of granting agency, the dominance of white authority reasserts itself in having the power to do so. Thanks to Letitia Meynell for this observation.

groups of socially injured persons. For Brown, basing a politics on injury, specifically, comes at the cost of having to repeatedly demonstrate this injury, thereby further entrenching the designations of “perpetrator” and “victim.” In other words, to found a politics on an identity based in injury, the relationship between identity and injury needs to be continually reiterated or “re-staged” (Brown, 2001, 55). As a result, the identities of *both* the injured (victims) and the injuring (perpetrators) become fixed as social positions, thereby limiting possibilities for imagining ambiguity or repositioning between these two distinct yet interdependent “states of injury” (Brown 1995, 27).

Moreover, even though formal or public avenues for grievance may offer disenfranchised persons the opportunity to finally speak out, these avenues are not necessarily equipped to respond to that which is “incommensurable and unquantifiable” about racial grief (Cheng 2000, 175). Put differently, since justice based on grievance and compensation relies on calculable and tangible evidence, it cannot attend to those internal reverberations of loss, those effects of racism that are most insidious precisely because they are unrepresentable or unspeakable. “Grief is the thing left over after grievance has had its say” (172), Cheng writes, drawing attention to the fact that the psychological residues of racial injury remain long after racism is publicly named. If we are to think, for example, of Kingston’s narrator’s tirade against her classmate as a kind of “speaking out” wherein the language of authority is taken up in an attempt to legitimate her complaints about the other girl, we cannot help but also notice its inexpressible “leftovers”; for even after she has “had her say” at this other girl’s expense, grief returns to land the narrator in bed with a mysterious illness for the next eighteen months (Kingston 1975, 181–82).

How then might agency be imagined within this condition of racial melancholy where it seems that loss cannot be adequately articulated and therefore mourned due, simultaneously, to psychological incorporations and social disavowals? In her aptly named paper “After Loss, What Then?” (2003), Judith Butler considers this dilemma. She suggests that certain losses, including those owing to practices of colonization, racism, and genocide, are often so devastating that the very thought of them, let alone “working through” or “getting over” them, is negated or made impossible (Butler 2003, 468). Thus, the more pertinent question is not how do we “get over” loss once and for all but, instead, how does what follows from loss bear its trace? (468–69). In other words, does the grief that ensues from loss have a vice grip on our potential for connection and creativity, or could it serve instead as a resource for the future? Given that we cannot reverse or get rid of the past, including the history of our

losses, literary theorist Mari Ruti (2004) suggests that we aim to create a more “imaginatively supple” relationship to it, that we find ways to live the past in the present as a site of possibility.³ But what would this look like for those suffering from losses associated with continuing histories of colonial violence and racial exclusion? How can healing occur if the conditions that perpetuate loss do not substantially shift but are instead invoked over and over again?

Cheng proposes that in order to see the productive potential for agency within the conditions of racial melancholy, melancholy itself must be interpreted as an integral, perhaps even necessary, response to loss, that is, part of an ongoing process of mourning that is neither finally a failure nor a success, but a sign of the “constant negotiation between loss and recollection” (Cheng 2000, 96). For instance, rather than counting an identification with assimilationist ideals simply a failure to preserve a coherent “ethnic self” in the face of white hegemony, Cheng sees it as a strategy in response to racism, a mode of defense that emerges to stave off further violation and to build a sense of self-security. Her reading of the narrator from *The Woman Warrior* illustrates this point. She does not resign the narrator to being an agency-less victim whose melancholy is entirely an effect of the racist social context within which she lives; instead, by acknowledging the complex ways in which the narrator negotiates her experiences and identifications (with her classmate, voices of authority, the figure of cheerleader) as an embodied, racialized subject, Cheng renders her a “subject of possibility” (to borrow the phrase from Elliot 1991, 240). In doing so, her work offers us a valuable example of the way in which psychoanalysis might be pressed into the service of social critique and a creative vision for agency. That is, by drawing attention to how the psychic life of power (to borrow the phrase from Butler’s 1997 title) is inextricable from those historical-material and discursive relations that keep racial hierarchies intact, this approach opens up new possibilities for conceptualizing the relationship between agency and embodiment.

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3. My reference to Mari Ruti here is based upon a public lecture at which she presented ideas from her recently published book *Reinventing the Soul: Posthumanist Theory and Psychic Life* (2006).

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