

**“Maternal Melancholia”:
Reading Diasporic Asian Canadian Motherwork in the Fictions of Kerri
Sakamoto, Hiromi Goto, and Madeleine Thien**

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean for an immigrant to be a “good” mother? Asian immigrants in Canada experience pressures to assimilate to a “normal,” homogenous ideal of Canadian culture—to erase aspects of their own cultural identity as well as their diasporic history. Asian mothers specifically are subject to mothering ideologies that depict white, middle-class, happy mothers as the norm. This thesis examines literary depictions of this phenomenon in novels by Kerri Sakamoto, Hiromi Goto, and Madeleine Thien. Each of these authors offers representations of motherhood that counter racialized and gendered ideals of mothering, and that refuse to ignore the sometimes traumatic effects that diaspora can have on immigrant families. Through David Eng and Shinhee Han’s notion of “racial melancholia”, I argue that the mothers in these novels conduct “maternal melancholia,” a form of motherwork that subverts dominant ideologies of mothering, resists assimilation, and sustains losses incurred through racialization and diaspora.

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Introduction:

Reading The Productive Melancholia of Motherwork in Asian Canadian Literature

Home life is something you have to cart around with you forever.
No Freudian shit for me, but the home life stuff gets tattooed on
you something awful. Or something good. Just depends. Hysteria
or history can become one and the same. Passed on from daughter
to daughter to daughter to daughter to . . .

(Hiromi Goto, *Chorus of Mushrooms* 36)

In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, one of Goto's Japanese Canadian protagonists, Murasaki, explains that her "home life stuff" is imprinted on her body. This "stuff" is comprised of not just her own personal history, but also a multi-generational family history that includes the trauma brought about by the dislocation of diaspora and the pressures to assimilate into dominant "white" British settler Canadian culture. Murasaki discovers that, rather than erase this cultural and traumatic diasporic history in response to the demands of settler culture to assimilate, her family preserves it and even transfers it from one generation to another—specifically through mother-child relations. In this way, preservation is a form of resistance, one that is powerful for its location in the private spheres of the home and the psyche. My thesis explores the questions that this interesting, but complicated mode of resistance raises: How might this preservation of cultural and diasporic history be productive in a society that enforces assimilation? What is the significance of motherwork that ensures this history is sustained across generations? In what ways might psychoanalysis be useful in understanding the diasporic experiences and motherwork of Asian Canadian women? My project explores possible answers to these questions in the realm of literature. It does so specifically by analyzing literary representations of mothering in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and Madeleine Thien's

Dogs at the Perimeter with a specific focus on the ways that motherwork can serve as a powerful form of resistance to assimilation.

Scholarship on Asian Canadians continues to develop new frameworks with which to better understand the experiences and positions of people located within this categorical group in the national landscape. Asian Canadian studies, Guy Beauregard explains, do not “*represent* the identity and culture of ‘Asian Canadians’ but instead *present* strategic bases from which to rethink social and cultural formations in Canada” (13). In keeping with Beauregard’s rendering, this project does not seek to represent the identity or culture of Asian Canadians; rather, it draws upon a new analytical framework in order to better understand their experiences of diaspora and assimilation. This framework is David Eng and Shinhee Han’s theory of “racial melancholia,” which they describe as the “underpinning of everyday conflicts and struggles with experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization” (344). What these conflicts and struggles amount to is a set of losses: hence Eng and Han’s adoption of the term “melancholia” as a term to address the nature of these experiences and the ways in which individuals respond to them. Thus, the theory of racial melancholia provides one useful way of understanding how Asians living in North America respond to national ideals that pressure them to disidentify with their ethnic cultures and erase their diasporic histories. Significantly, Eng and Han also position racial melancholia as a mode by which Asians (and others subject to racialization) can reject these pressures and sustain their heritage and individual experiences of trauma associated with diaspora, political conflict, and racism. In the discussion that follows in this thesis, I apply this concept of racial melancholia to literary representations of Asian Canadian motherhood, using the theory specifically to examine motherwork as a negotiation of and response to national

ideals. The representations that I consider in this thesis are subversive. They include difficult issues such as abuse, incest, and abandonment. I argue that these challenging representations of motherhood (representations which deviate from normative and “acceptable” modes of mothering) can be understood as reactions to cultural and historical erasure—in other words, as rejections of assimilation. Building on Eng and Han’s racial melancholia, I propose that this new mode of representing Asian Canadian mothering as “melancholic mothering” in the novels I discuss illustrates the productive political potential of transgressive motherwork.

Racial melancholia derives from Freud’s work on melancholia and its relationship to mourning. Freud defines “melancholia” in opposition to “mourning.” He describes the latter as the “regular” response to loss in which the subject’s ego gradually detaches from the object and forms new attachments to other objects (Freud 243). Conversely, in melancholia, the subject’s ego maintains its attachment to the lost object; it does not let go of the lost object or move on to form attachments to new objects. The ego sustains the lost object by identifying with it and incorporating it into itself. The incorporated object becomes a part of the ego, and the ego thus preserves the object. For Freud, the deviation from mourning to melancholia points to a “pathological condition” in the subject because it demonstrates an inability to ‘get over’ loss (243). This is where Eng and Han’s racial melancholia departs from Freud’s: while Freud believes that it is healthy to let go of lost objects, and that it is unhealthy to hold onto them, Eng and Han situate melancholia as a potentially productive, psychologically and culturally enriching—perhaps even “healthy”—response to the experiences and losses of diaspora.

Eng and Han apply melancholia specifically to Asian Americans and their experiences of immigration and assimilation to illustrate the productive potential of maintaining loss. Those

who immigrate to North America¹ incur the losses of their motherland, homeplace, and loved ones. Once in North America, they and their family members are pressured to assimilate to dominant culture by letting go of their own cultural norms and values and adopting North American ones. They must detach from their motherland, mother-tongue, cultural traditions, and ethnic identity to form new attachments to the ideal of whiteness, the English language, Western customs, and a non-ethnic Canadian identity. In many ways, adopting new ideals and customs can lead to “social gains [which provide] access to political, economic, and cultural privilege” (Eng and Han 362). The problem with the assimilation model, though, is that diasporic subjects like Asian Canadians must forfeit all attachments to their ethnic heritage in order to access these social gains. Though Freud argues that subjects need to let go of loss and form new attachments, in cases where this letting go includes the (forced) forfeiture of one’s culture, history, and identity, one can immediately see that mourning loss is not as healthy as Freud would suggest. Instead of accepting and moving on from loss, the diasporic characters in the novels I address here form melancholic attachments to their lost objects. In doing so, they internalize the objects and preserve them within the ego. This incorporation of loss ensures that the objects are less vulnerable to assimilation. In this way, the melancholic subject sustains his or her historical and cultural identity, despite the pressures he or she face to mourn, and thus eventually erases, them. According to Eng and Han, the psychic work of melancholia

¹ Though Eng and Han’s critical theory is based on Asian Americans, I apply it to Asian Canadian studies. Since critical Asian Canadian literature studies only emerged in the late 1980s, this application of Asian American theories onto Asian Canadian research is both prevalent and beneficial (Ty, *Autoethnography* 6). Asian Canadian scholar Eleanor Ty moves “beyond national boundaries, a demarcation to which literary critics who write on Asian American texts have tended to describe. [Her] view is that there are too many commonalities in the situations of Asian Canadians and Asian Americans to ignore and that a cross-border comparative reading is fruitful” (*Politics* 29). Numerous other scholars in the field attest to this practice; Iyko Day even suggests the bridging term, “Asian North American.” While I am conscious of the distinctions between Asian Americans and Asian Canadians, some of which are laboriously outlined by Donald Goellnicht, the advantages of blending national boundaries are substantial.

demonstrates the subject's "absolute refusal to relinquish the other—to forfeit alterity—at any costs" (364). The work of melancholia points to a resilient and cunning effort to preserve those losses which are integral to the subject, rather than a pathological inability to let go. In the contexts of immigration and assimilation, melancholia is a powerful mode of preserving one's ethnic heritage and history.

In addition to serving as a mode of preserving one's cultural identity, melancholia is also a powerful mode of refusing to forget national histories of institutionalized racism. Canada perpetuates multicultural ideals to deny its systematic racism. The country has a long history of racial exclusion including notably the implementation of the head tax on Chinese immigrants, and the internment of Japanese Canadians during and following WWII. As Eng and Han observe, "[d]iscourses of [North] American exceptionalism and democratic myths of liberty, individualism, and inclusion force a misremembering of these exclusions" (347). The state attempts to erase its history of racism to appear tolerant and inclusive. It defaults on discourses of exceptionalism, heralding Asian Canadians as model minority citizens. Under the "model minority stereotype," Asian Canadians are branded as academically and economically successful and void of any personal problems" (Eng and Han 351). Though this appears favorable, Eng and Han point out that it actually makes it "difficult for Asian Americans [and Canadians] to express any legitimate political, cultural, and social needs, as the stereotype demands not only an enclosed but also a passive self-sufficiency" (351). The stereotype functions as a powerful tool for the dominant group to sustain power over Asian Canadians. By exaggerating their successes, the stereotype deflects attention away from the fact that Asian Canadians have been and continue to be subject to racial prejudice. It silences the minority group into a state of complacency,

detering those within this group from voicing their discontent and voiding their legitimate concerns. Melancholically preserved histories of exclusion and loss therefore contradict this stereotype and other democratic fallacies. Racial melancholia highlights and contests the ways in which the state systematically pressures Asian Canadians into assimilation, specifically into erasing their cultural history as well as the memory of forms of institutionalized racism to which they have been subject.

Dominant mothering ideologies further perpetuate expectations to assimilate and further enforce the losses of ethnic histories and cultures by normalizing white experiences of mothering. There are two dominant ideologies which motherhood scholars have identified as largely responsible for informing contemporary maternal practices: “intensive mothering” and “new momism.” These ideologies, as Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels explain, are sets of “ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media,” that dictate what the “good” mother looks like (4). Good mothering, according to both “new momism” and “intensive mothering” is ahistorical and unrepresentative of the heterogeneity of mothers and mothering practices. Moreover, while they are ideologies, they do not see themselves as such. In fact, they fail to acknowledge the fact that, as Adrienne Rich eloquently put it, “[m]otherhood—unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism—has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism” (33). Motherhood is informed by incalculable histories and numerous ideologies and must be understood in that light. In contrast, intensive mothering and new momism reduce this complex entity to a single experience and ignore the political implications of such a reduction. They diminish motherhood, as Andrea O’Reilly writes, to “one experience of

motherhood, that of white middle-class women” (“Ain’t That Love” 80). By depicting the presumed experience of white-middle class mothers as the *only* one, these ideologies effectively ignore the historical and political complexities embedded in all other experiences of motherhood. With seemingly no other model of motherwork available to them, diasporic mothers feel compelled to mourn their personal values, ethnic backgrounds, and cultural histories and adopt this dominant mode of mothering. Since intensive mothering and new momism represent the doctrines “of contemporary motherhood that all [North American] women are disciplined into”—doctrines which cut “across race and class lines”—deviation from them results in the mothers’ exclusion from dominant culture (O’Brien Hallstein 107). Mothers in North America must adhere to these discourses and assimilate themselves as well as their children. Mothering that is rooted in melancholia therefore serves as an important critique of dominant forms of mothering, highlighting in particular their racism and their disregard of historical and cultural differences.

My project highlights the value of the theory of racial melancholia to critiques of normalized motherhood prevalent in social studies today. Mothers who are melancholic psychically sustain their losses and unconsciously invoke them in their mothering. In the case of the novels I examine, the mothers recall stories of their diasporic experiences, memories of their motherland, and histories of exclusion in Canada. They also share their ethnic language and cultural traditions with their children. This unconscious motherwork of tapping into the mothers’ preserved losses, summoning elements of their ethnic culture, and imparting these components to their children reflects the reality that mothers have different values, beliefs, and experiences than that espoused by the dominant ideal. In opposition to intensive mothering and new momism,

melancholic motherwork highlights the diversity of motherhood as well as the political potential of mothering practices, and it refuses to reduce itself to any single model. It not only sustains the mothers' rich histories and experiences, but also honours them.

Melancholic motherwork also prioritizes the mothers' needs, controverting the self-sacrifice enforced by dominant mothering ideologies. Intensive mothering and new momism demand that mothers relinquish their needs and desires for those of their children. As Douglas and Michaels write, dominant culture instructs mothers to "devote [their] entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being" to their children (4). Children must be the all-consuming focus of the mother's life. Mothers who consistently and without fail sacrifice and devote themselves to their children are positioned as "good" or ideal mothers. On the other hand, mothers who tend to their own needs and desires are vilified as "bad" or negligent mothers. These ideologies purport that "good" mothers are completely fulfilled by their motherwork (O'Reilly, "New Momism" 205). Much like the model minority stereotype, this fallacy of fulfillment keeps subjects from voicing their discontent. It insinuates that "good" mothers are satisfied by their motherwork, and thus mothers who are unsatisfied must be "bad." Mothers who practise melancholia refute this logic by displaying discontent and ambivalence. They also defy the expectation of self-sacrifice by tending to their own needs. Melancholia is itself an internal, unconscious process that draws the subject inward. It necessitates the ego's full absorption into its objects. A mother who is engaged in this process manifests various symptoms of the condition, including "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, [and] loss of the capacity to love" (Freud 244). The melancholic mother, consumed with her own unconscious work, grows disinterested in her external realm and the form of motherwork that she

is expected to perform. She withdraws from others and tends to her own needs. This attention to one's own psychic health is a form of self-care. Mothers who are melancholic practise this self-care in direct opposition to the expectation of maternal self-sacrifice.² Because melancholia is an unconscious effort and thus occurs in the interior realm of the psyche, mothers who are melancholic can tend to their own needs inconspicuously. This ability for melancholic losses to remain undetected is key, as it allows melancholic mothers to evade the condemning labels of “bad,” negligent, and/or selfish mother for rejecting the idealizations of motherhood.

As I apply racial melancholia to the gendered and racialized context of motherhood, I recognize the tensions between psychoanalysis and feminist critique, as well as the tensions between psychoanalysis and critical race studies. Psychoanalysis has and continues to face considerable criticism for sustaining patriarchal and racial biases. The privileged field has historically been associated with pathologizing white upper-class women and still demonstrates biases in gender, class, race, and sexuality.³ Presently, however, it is experiencing a resurgence in gender and race studies, causing scholars to (re)consider its potential to constructively contribute to critical race and feminist analyses.⁴ Eng and Han's application of melancholia to the context of

² The concept of maternal self-care is often co-opted by motherhood literature. In such instances, Debra Langan observes, this literature patronizingly enforces “women's disciplinary practices on their bodies” to appear attractive (269). It becomes a moniker for sustaining superficial appeal. The co-opted rhetoric of self-care undermines mothers' requirements of agency and autonomy and needs to be distinguished from self-care, which actually emphasizes the mothers' well-being for their own physical and psychological health.

³ Psychotherapist Phyllis Chesler published a critique of the patriarchal, racist, classist, and homophobic discourse of clinical studies and its cultural and anti-immigrant biases in *Women and Madness* in 1972. In her revised second edition, published in 2005, she maintains that the field continues to demonstrate these prejudices. Chesler's arguments are supported and extended by Paula J. Caplan and Lisa Cosgrove in *Bias in Psychiatric Diagnosis*, and Gina Wong, editor of *Moms Gone Mad*, among others.

⁴ Anne Anling Cheng applies psychoanalysis to her examination of race in literature in *The Melancholy of Race*. The influential text is omitted from this project because it emphasizes the conscious work of melancholic resistance, while this thesis is rooted in Eng and Han's contention that melancholia is an unconscious effort. Motherhood and feminist scholars are also revisiting psychoanalysis, as demonstrated by the collection of essays entitled *Mothering and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Petra Bueskens. The book explores the “maternal turn” in contemporary culture to psychoanalytic therapy and was published during the writing of this thesis.

Asian Americans and their experiences of immigration and assimilation, for instance, exemplifies the ways in which reconfigurations of psychoanalysis can challenge the sexism and racism seemingly embedded in the field. Building on their reconfiguration, I hope that my application of Eng and Han's notion of racial melancholia to the context of racialized motherwork deconstructs oppressive ideologies of motherhood and demonstrates the productive capacity of melancholia to sustain loss, resist the erasure of ethnic culture and identity, and assert autonomy.

As I indicated above, my project applies racial melancholia to literary representations of racialized motherhood in Asian Canadian literature. The expanding field of Asian Canadian literature offers a broad selection of texts to consider. Early works such as Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* are among some of the most well-known texts in this field, and are thus obvious choices. These novels' resolutions, however, depict a sense of closure and finality that are inconsistent with the politics of a theory based on melancholia. Other contemporary works such as Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* and Hiromi Goto's *The Kappa Child* significantly grapple with the politics of gender, sexuality, and reproduction. They are intriguing works for this project to examine, but they enter into the speculative realm of science fiction and are therefore beyond the parameters of this thesis. Other possible works to consider include Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, and Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter*. All of these texts might be better categorized as "Asian global narratives," as Eleanor Ty suggests, rather than Asian Canadian narratives, since they take place globally—in the Caribbean, Sri Lanka, India, and the United States—with brief mentions of Canada, if any (130). Notably, the themes in Gowda's *Secret Daughter* are consistent with the

concerns of this thesis. The novel depicts parallel storylines of an American mother who transnationally adopts a daughter and the daughter's biological mother in India. It provides a compelling exploration of the ways in which mothers and daughters in non-normative families challenge gendered and racialized ideals of the nuclear family structure. The idealistic resolution, however, of the white mother overcoming her colour blindness and accepting her daughter's Indian ethnicity verges on oversimplifying the complexities of diaspora and racism and led me to omit this novel from my project.

I have chosen to focus this thesis on *The Electrical Field*, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and *Dogs at the Perimeter* because these novels highlight the ways in which pressures to assimilate affect motherhood and mother-child relationships. They portray diasporic experiences such as the Japanese Canadian internment and the Khmer Rouge genocide, as well as dislocation as a result of exile from China and Japan during WWII. Though these traumatic incidents incite loss in the mother characters, dominant ideologies, such as the model minority ideal, pressure these characters to mourn these events and thus completely "get over" and expunge the losses that ensue from them. Each of the novels, however, rejects this demand to mourn and forget. Through melancholic motherwork, the mother figures they depict, tend to the losses they experience. *The Electrical Field* depicts a protagonist who positions herself as a mother figure to address the disruptions to her physical, psychological, and sexual development, disruptions that are the direct result of having been interned in WWII. *Chorus of Mushrooms* illustrates three generations of mother figures who express their melancholic grief and reinforce the loss of their preserved culture in distinct ways as means of collectively strengthening melancholia. *Dogs at the Perimeter* depicts a mother who, through reconstructing and narrating the losses that other Asian

immigrants experience, can process some of her own traumatic memories of the Khmer Rouge regime without directly mourning (and therefore losing) them. Through melancholia, all of the mothers in these novels sustain their losses and address their needs. For Sakamoto, Goto, and Thien, the psychic work of melancholia and the physical work of mothering go hand in hand; they are complementary efforts that transgress the dominant ideologies that enforce homogeneity in terms of race, culture, emotion, and motherwork.

Chapter one of this thesis reads Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* with a focus on the ways in which melancholic motherwork enables individuals to respond to the losses brought about by internment. *The Electrical Field* returns to the shameful detainment of Japanese Canadian citizens to challenge the notions of mourning and closure. While Canadian society tends to insist on moving on from internment history by letting go of it—essentially forgetting that it happened, Sakamoto's novel suggests that melancholia is a more appropriate response. It makes this argument by paralleling the internment past with a present-day murder mystery, illustrating the rippling repercussions of internment specifically through the subversive protagonist mother figure. Asako is depicted as having internalized the camp's racism as well as the blame for the losses it incites. Overcome with self-reproach, Asako incriminates herself for the death of her brother Eiji, with whom she shared an incestuous relationship. Problematically, she locates her Japanese body as the source of her shame and trauma and severs her Japanese identity from herself. This racialized violence disrupts her physiological development so that she prematurely enters menopause and therefore cannot biologically reproduce. Thus Sakamoto portrays, through her protagonist's condition, the ongoing physical and psychological violence of institutionalized racism on racialized subjects in Canada.

Significantly, Sakamoto's positioning of her protagonist as a self-identified mother figure despite her physical limitation suggests that motherwork functions as a productive outlet for Asako to confront her internalized racism and sustain memories of the violence of internment. Although Asako consciously rejects her Japanese identity and refuses to reproduce it physically, the melancholic form of mothering she practices towards her family, and also towards a child in her neighbourhood, allows her to unconsciously sustain her family's history (including memories of its internment) and thus reproduce it. Through the motherwork of nurturing her dependent family members, Asako tempers her conscious assimilationist efforts to escape internment trauma with the melancholic desire to preserve its violent history. Through mothering her young neighbour Sachi, she unconsciously reproduces the melancholically preserved losses of internment. Their mother-child relationship helps Sachi to form positive associations between her own Japanese identity, culture, and body. While Asako's motherwork yields productive results, it is also highly subversive. From afar, Asako watches Sachi and her friend intimately explore their bodies. This voyeurism is made even more transgressive by allusions to Asako's incestuous relationship with her brother Eiji before his death. Sakamoto explains that she deliberately created a difficult and "unlikeable" protagonist who is "hard to love" in order to reject model minority depictions (qtd. in Tihanyi 2). The subversive nature of her character illustrates the direct and indirect consequences of internment. It functions as a reminder that the violence of institutionalized racism does not cease when internment ends, but rather continues to affect the individuals who were detained as well as their communities, even decades after the fact. *The Electrical Field* illustrates that a melancholic retention of internment history is necessary in order to keep this national injustice a part of the collective unconscious. In so doing

it also highlights how melancholic mothering can help the descendants of those who were interned understand the after-effects of this traumatic event and its continued impact on their lives.

The second chapter of this thesis examines the practices of sustaining and transferring loss as forms of melancholic motherwork in Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Goto portrays the politically productive potential of a collective investment in loss. Each of her Japanese Canadian mother figures internalizes her lost objects and transfers them onto her descendants. The grandmother, Naoe, incurs the losses of her family, freedom, and subjectivity during Japan's occupation of China. Once she and her daughter, Keiko, immigrate to Canada, they risk losing their Japanese identity, culture, and language to assimilation. In response to this risk, the women melancholically internalize their loved objects. They unconsciously transfer their losses to one another and to their (grand)daughter, Murasaki, through unique expressions of melancholia. Naoe conveys her grief through speech. She mutters constantly, flooding the house with Japanese language, family stories, and cultural mythologies. By reproducing the language and history of their threatened culture, Naoe resists assimilation and sustains their family heritage. Keiko practices the Japanese maternal customs of hair washing and ear cleaning. In doing so, she preserves a part of their ethnic culture and also expresses her melancholia. Externalizing her grief through touch, Keiko passes it onto the other women who absorb it. Unlike the externalizing practices of mourning, these maternal transferences are pleasurable experiences that reinforce these characters' melancholic losses. Murasaki contributes to the family's community of grief by preparing elaborate Japanese meals and feeding her family physical morsels of its ethnic culture. The introjection of physical Japanese objects mimics the

melancholic internalization of external lost objects, physically and psychically fortifying the losses of the family's Japanese culture. In these ways, *Chorus of Mushrooms* illustrates the productive capacity of sustaining, strengthening, and transferring loss.

Goto's portrayal of the internalization and transference of loss illustrates the potential of melancholia at a communal level. Though each of the mother figures internalizes loss, the mothers' individual preservations are made more powerful through the psychic investment and support of others. *Chorus of Mushrooms* highlights the fact that the work of melancholia can benefit from reinforcement. The transference and reinforcement of loss strengthens melancholic preservation, ensuring that the objects remain vitally at the forefront of the ego. These processes also enable the mother figures to collectively rather than individually confront dominant ideologies. This collective approach to melancholic grieving points to the potential of racial melancholia as a political act rather than as a pathological condition of the individual.

The third chapter of this thesis explores the ways in which internalizations of loss can negatively affect mother-child relationships in Thien's *Dogs at the Perimeter*. In analyzing the representation of the abusive mother character Janie, I take up Eng and Han's point that sometimes a dual process of responding to loss through melancholia *and mourning* has significant potential for those who experience the traumas of war, diaspora, and subsequently racism in their new home environments. Thien depicts a challenging mother figure, Janie, who as a child is subject to the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. The regime compels Janie to internalize her mother figures and motherland as what Melanie Klein calls "bad" objects. These internalizations haunt Janie and later influence her own motherwork. After she immigrates to Canada, Janie is confronted with assimilationist attitudes which further complicate her

relationship to her internalized objects by pressuring her to detach from them. Her “bad” internalized objects return in her adulthood against her will, invading her consciousness, entering her physical realm, and possessing her faculties. It is this traumatic manifestation that causes Janie to physically abuse her son. In her representation of this character, Thien portrays a mother figure whose abusive motherwork is a result of her subjection to the effects of diaspora and assimilation and the internalizations of “bad” objects.

This chapter ultimately argues that Janie creatively takes up a combined process of mourning and melancholia. In Freud’s strictly oppositional definition of the two modes of grieving, the process of mourning entails a complete giving up of the object, and the process of melancholia gives rise to the preservation of the object. According to this model, a combination of the two responses is impossible: one cannot both mourn and melancholically preserve an object. Eng and Han, however, offer an alternative understanding of the relationship between the two processes through their analysis of a case study in which it appeared possible for the subject to mourn without entirely giving up his melancholically preserved losses. *Dogs at the Perimeter* provides an interesting example of a comparable case through its portrayal of Janie, who likewise enacts both forms of grieving without sacrificing her melancholically preserved objects in the process. She does this, I argue, by engaging in “narrativization,” the process where, as motherhood scholar Regina Edmonds explains, mothers narrate their resettlement struggles to manage their traumatic experiences and their responses to these experiences (51). Janie uses narrativization to process loss, but the losses that her narratives address are not actually hers. Rather, she narrates other characters’ grief, imagining and giving voice to their losses in the process rather than directly addressing her own. In this way, Janie can mourn through narration

but she does not have to give up her losses in doing so. In this way, *Dogs at the Perimeter* shows that narrativization is a useful “negotiation” of mourning and melancholia, to use Eng and Han’s term, one that enables this complex mother figure to sustain her losses.

It is my hope that this project contributes meaningfully to the current critical discussion of Asian Canadian literature and feminist discourses on mothering. Eng and Han’s theory, and some of the work of psychoanalysis from which it draws, offer a much needed critical apparatus through which to explore the more difficult representations of mothering, such as those in which mothers commit acts of violence against children. I hope to contribute to further thinking in this area by applying theories of motherwork to this notion of racial melancholia. Mothers occupy an extremely influential position in which they can challenge the erasure of their ethnic culture, history, and identity, by passing them onto their children. The representations of motherhood that I examine in this thesis are subversive, challenging, and unconventional. They break away from normative representations of “good” or normative mothering. These transgressive forms of mothering emphasize the fact while racial melancholia is a consequence of racialization and assimilation, at the same time it also serves as a confrontation and rejection of these processes. That is precisely what makes it so powerful: racialized diasporic subjects can transform their positions of subjection and loss into a mode of political resistance.

Chapter 1: Currents of Resistance in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*

Introduction

This chapter examines the case that Kerri Sakamoto presents in *The Electrical Field* for dealing with the traumatic legacy of internment through melancholic mothering—a case which focuses upon one community's refusal to forget the losses that its members incurred as a result of this moment in Canadian history. The detainment of Japanese Canadians from 1942 - 1949 was, as Roy Miki explains, an abrogation of citizens' rights on the sole basis of race that uprooted, dispossessed, dispersed, and deported tens of thousands of Canadian citizens of Japanese Canadian descent (2). *The Electrical Field* portrays a protagonist named Asako who was detained during internment and who has internalized the camps' racism. This internalization causes her to become self-denigrative to the extent that she severs herself from her ethnic identity and assumes responsibility for her losses, including the death of her older brother. Her internalized racism and self-blame further disrupt her sexual development so that she cannot move past her negative understanding of the Japanese body or physically reproduce; thus, Asako's self-positioning as a surrogate mother, despite this limitation, gestures to the productive potential of her motherwork. Through melancholic motherwork, Sakamoto's complex protagonist preserves the losses she sustained through internment and tends to its after-effects as they are experienced by her family and community.

By revisiting a purportedly resolved and forgotten moment in national history, *The Electrical Field* also suggests that the nation needs to re-evaluate its response to internment. Sakamoto published the novel in 1998, which was, as Vikki Visvis points out, fifty years after

internment and ten years after Redress (67). According to Miki, Redress was designed by the state to be “a moment of closure” for Japanese Canadians to “resolve their troubled ties to the wartime injustices” (7). The novel questions the possibility and desirability of such a closure, one that is depicted in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, another work of historical fiction based on the Japanese Canadian internment experience. Kogawa’s novel is concerned with searching for a settlement in order to move on from internment trauma. Its concluding passage, the “Excerpt from the Memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the house and the Senate of Canada, April 1946,” functions as a catharsis for the fictional narrative and “seemingly suggest[s] some form of closure on the historical wound” upon which the novel is based (Liu 594).⁵ In contrast, *The Electrical Field* refuses to provide closure. It “resists ‘surrendering’” to any conclusion, as Kate Chiwen Liu points out, drawing on Miki’s language (594). One of the ways in which this novel refuses closure is through its depiction of characters that do not let go of their losses and move on, but instead remain haunted by the past to the extent that they suffer the ongoing repercussions of internment.⁶ Sakamoto’s take on internment history generates a unique and compelling case for the productive capacity of melancholically sustaining the losses of the past to serve political as well as personal purposes.

The novel depicts a protagonist who responds to the physical and psychological violences of internment through melancholia. While detained, Asako loses her brother Eiji, with whom she

⁵ Miki argues against this interpretation of the excerpt, explaining that the document’s lack of Japanese Canadian political voices demonstrates that “nothing has happened to change the social and political background of Naomi’s experiences” (*Broken Entries* 116). Thus, he continues, this document reaches neither fictional nor nonfictional closure and necessitates further political action. Despite this logical argument, scholars generally accept and infer the excerpt at the end of *Obasan* as “closing” the historical injustice. See for example Amoko’s “Resilient ImagiNations,” Beaugregard’s “After *Obasan*,” and Visvis’s “Trauma Remembered and Forgotten.”

⁶ The book’s strategic refusal to mourn, as Marlene Goldman describes it, clearly resonates with readers (363). The novel won the Commonwealth Prize for Best First Book and the Japan-Canada Literary Award, and was shortlisted for the Governor General’s Award for Fiction. In a literary review, Rita Wong proclaims that the book “pounds on the doors of passion and history with compellingly loud strong thumps” (32).

shared an incestuous relationship, and internalizes the blame for his death as well as the racism from the camps. She identifies her Japanese body as the source of her shame and trauma, and as a result she consciously repudiates it. Her body responds to this rejection by simultaneously stunting Asako in her pre-pubescent frame of mind and ceasing her menstruation at the age of fourteen. Asako's confinement to this particular moment in her life illustrates her internment to a racialized and prejudiced understanding of the Japanese body—a perception that continues to remain with her even into her adulthood. Moreover, her body's premature menopause demonstrates her physical rejection of the Japanese subject and ultimate refusal to reproduce it. The fact, then, that despite these limitations, Asako later becomes a surrogate mother points to an unconscious desire within her to foster the Japanese subject and reproduce elements of her culture. Her position as a surrogate mother further enables her to address her stunted sexual development and her racialized perception of the Japanese body, problematically through watching her surrogate daughter, Sachi, from afar. Asako's subversive nature is symptomatic of the institutionalized racism to which she was and continues to be subject.

Asako's melancholic motherwork, which gives powerful voice to the novel's reoccurring themes of violence and loss, highlights the ways that internment continues to haunt the Japanese Canadian community. Asako and Sachi both lose their beloved companions to racialized violence and blame themselves for these respective losses. Asako loses her brother Eiji, with whom she inappropriately explored her sexual curiosity. Similarly, Sachi loses her friend Tam, with whom she begins discovering her body, to the town's tragic murder. By mirroring these characters' losses and their culpability for said losses, the novel illustrates the ways in which the effects of internment continue to permeate through the community. Sakamoto's emphasis on violence and

loss effectively “impedes premature notions of closure and encourages ongoing remembrance” (Visvis 68).

While much scholarship on *The Electrical Field* focuses heavily on the tragic cycle of loss, this chapter emphasizes the productive potential of preserving loss. In an interview, Sakamoto proclaims that the Japanese Canadian community needs to “move beyond the collective malaise in an effort to rethink connections between history, responsibility, and social change” (qtd. in Howells 126). She indicates that the preservation of internment history is necessary but more valuable when coupled with questions about responsibility and considerations of how to effect change. The scholarship surrounding this novel would also do well to highlight the important aspect of social change. The criticism foregrounding Asako’s psychological stasis is greatly informed by Goldman’s reading of Asako’s “dangerous emotional circuit powered by depression and loss” (367). For Goldman, Asako’s victimization entraps her in a cycle of violence, and her grief is used both defensively and offensively to “deflect attention away from the ways in which those who have experienced loss continue to wield power” (375). The pattern that Goldman describes is important to recognize, but scholarship that continues to make this point in its analyses of texts about racism in Canada runs the risks of pathologizing and even incriminating those who have experienced institutional injustice. Conversely, Coral Ann Howells argues that the victimized characters are neither confined to their predetermined fate, nor coerced into embodying their condemnation as “monstrous Others.” Howells, moreover, conjectures that for Asako to effectively move forward, she must “move outside her willed amnesia” and develop human relationships (140). But as Andrea Stone indicates, Asako *does* demonstrate this desire for human relationships, particularly, her “desire to protect and ultimately

save Sachi” (48). While Howells and Stone loosely gesture towards the hopeful possibilities of Asako’s interpersonal relationships, the important tensions in her maternal relationships with Sachi and members of her biological family demonstrate a productive potential that has been largely left unexamined. Thus, in my efforts to “move beyond the collective malaise,” I build on current discussions of the nature of loss in the novel to illustrate the ways in which motherwork enables Asako to melancholically preserve the objects she lost through internment and, as a result of this melancholia, contribute to the reproduction of Japanese culture and people.

Living Through Internment and Embodying Its Racism

This section examines the novel’s representation of the Japanese Canadian internment as degrading the ethnic community and inciting the losses of identity, family, and culture—experiences and losses which would later inform the protagonist’s acts of mothering. Upon first entering a detainment camp, Asako is affronted by “the smell of the live-stock building that made [her] feel sick—a disinfectant used on the walls where [they] slept, and the musty stink of cows and their business lurking under it” (Sakamoto 79). Japanese Canadians like Asako were stripped of their basic human rights and herded like animals into unsanitary conditions with hazardous odours and exposed excrement. She describes the claustrophobia she felt in this environment: everyone was “too close. Those smells, those noises, those voices... I was sick of it, sick to death of them all” (101). The assault on her senses prompts Asako to locate those immediately around her, Japanese Canadians, as the source of her suffocation. She comes to associate Japanese characteristics, the smells, the noises, and the voices, with contempt and aversion.

After being released from incarceration, Asako’s prejudice continues to intensify and

translates into violence. With no home to return to, Asako and her family settle in a rural Ontario town.⁷ They coincidentally end up in a neighbourhood with two other Japanese Canadian families, causing Asako to lament that she cannot seem to escape the Japanese characteristics she finds so nauseating. Her neighbour Yano, in particular, embodies these markers. His distinctive smell of fried fish and daikon “made me flush with the shame at our shared habits, our odours” (114). Yano literally reeks of odours that Asako associates with the maltreatment she experienced during internment, and this evokes in her feelings of revulsion. The smells, moreover, point to their “shared habits” and suggest to her that her own body is a source of supposedly Japanese-specific sights, smells, and sounds. She notes that she and Yano’s wife cringe at “the horror of hearing ourselves vulgar or rough in our own ears” (116). Repulsed by their mannerisms, Asako is horrified by the fact that she too emits these characteristics that she has come to see as foul. She desperately seeks to expel what Julia Kristeva has described as the abject within by splitting her identity into two parts. Eng and Han describe this splitting as severing “the Asian American psyche.” As they go on to explain, “this cleaving of the psyche might be productively thought about in terms of an altered, racialized model of classic Freudian fetishism. That is, assimilation into the national fabric demands a psychic splitting on the part of the Asian American subject” (348). Racialized individuals like Asako perform a psychic cleaving to separate the racially othered object, or, in this case, the racial abject, from the normalized Canadian subject. These individuals can then deny the ethnic part of themselves and identify

⁷ The Canadian government seized Japanese Canadians’ assets and properties and liquidated them to pay for their internment. As a result of this dispossession, Japanese Canadians did not have homes to which they could return. Devastatingly, approximately “10,000 people, including thousands of women and children... were listed as persons who were, according to the government, detained to be shipped to Japan” (Miki, *Redress* 102). After enduring internment, a significant population was deported, while others were displaced and dispersed throughout Canada. Miki provides clear demographics of this distribution in *Redress* (105). Many of those who stayed in Canada resigned to smaller farming communities where they worked as labourers, as Asako’s family does.

solely as Canadian. This cleaving allows Asako to seek refuge in the national fabric, but only at the expense of her ethnic self.

In addition to stripping Japanese Canadians of their inalienable human rights and ethnic identities, internment also incites the physical loss of loved ones. The camp's squalid conditions become a significant factor contributing to the death of Asako's older brother, Eiji. Asako attributes his passing to the fact that he catches pneumonia while playing with her in the lake. She describes luring him into the water one night to prove that he preferred her company over that of the other girls who vied for his attention. The pre-adolescent siblings are often depicted as horsing around with incestuous undertones. Their play is troubling for various reasons and it may have led to Eiji's pneumonia, but it clearly is not the cause of his death. Even during the 1940s, pneumonia would have been easily curable with antibiotics.⁸ Given the toxic conditions of the camps, however, and the Canadian authorities' inhumane treatment of those detained, it is likely that he did not receive the medicine or care he would have needed to get healthy again. As Goldman contends, "it was likely the unsanitary camp conditions rather than the swim that killed him" (375). Eiji's death exemplifies the toxic conditions to which those interned were all subject, but this is something that self-loathing Asako is unable to discern.

Through her internalization of the camp's racism, Asako also assumes the blame for the losses it incited. Detainees like Asako internalized the racism of their oppressors to such an

⁸ Scott Dowell et al. conducted an analysis of pneumonia-based mortality rates in American children from 1939 through 1996. Their results show that there were "steep declines in mortality rates for pneumonia from 1944 - 1950," and they attribute this decrease to the introduction of penicillin as treatment (1399). The authors conclude that "some of the largest reductions in rates of mortality from childhood pneumonia during the past 50 years may have resulted from expanded access to medical care for poor children"; thus, children who have poor access to healthcare or "*might otherwise not receive prompt clinical attention*" may fall fatally ill to pneumonia (1406, emphasis mine). In a first-world nation, penicillin and its predecessors (sulfanilamide and sulfapyridine) should have been accessible to all who required them. As a Canadian citizen, Eiji was entitled to proper health care—even during internment. Based on the conditions of the camp, though, he likely did not receive it. Reasonably, his death was preventable and a result of poor or lack of medical attention.

extent that they felt responsible for the losses that internment caused them. Asako believes that by being Japanese she is implicitly responsible for her incarceration and this compels her to locate herself as the source of her losses. Self-blame leads her to assume full culpability for her brother Eiji's death. She maintains that "it was me, selfish, hungry child that I was. It was me wanting the world my way, never to change, ever. It was my fault, all my fault—not the war, not the government, not some hakujin stranger named Mackenzie" (Sakamoto 301). Internalized racism and blame deflect Asako's self-incrimination. Asako insists that it is all her fault for "wanting the world [her] way" and that in trying to reclaim this world she caused her brother's death. She explicitly contends that it is not the fault of the war, the government, or the Prime Minister, even though they are responsible for dramatically altering her world. They uprooted, dispossessed, and incarcerated an entire community, situating Asako and Eiji within the camps. Still, she vows that "I did not hold them accountable. For these were private matters; family matters" (Sakamoto 110). This refusal to attribute due blame was common among interned individuals who wanted to "forget" about the past and move on from it; Sakamoto's portrayal of a vehemently self-incriminating protagonist, Goldman points out, reminds readers that the Japanese Canadian "community as a whole was coerced into acting as a scapegoat...by internalizing the hatred [and culpability] of their oppressors" (371). The dominant political structures and figures that coerced Asako into assuming responsibility for her losses are precisely the same systems that incited the loss of her brother and ultimately pressured her into splitting her identity and denying her Japanese self.

The blame and racism that Asako is pressured into internalizing disrupt her reproductive system. Asako's body, Stone writes, "absorbs the guilt she feels for the death... of her

brother” (38). This absorption of guilt is a traumatic affliction which stunts her sexual development. Asako cannot move on from the shame she feels towards their inappropriate play and his death, and as a result her body “disrupt[s] chronology” (Stone 38). At fourteen years of age, Asako is both trapped in her pre-pubescent understanding of sexuality and launched prematurely into menopause. Building on Stone’s theory that the simultaneous stunting and progression are “concrete, physical symptoms of [internment] history,” I contend that these symptoms mirror her internalized racism and cleaving of her ethnic identity (37). As I argued earlier, the camps’ racialization and racism taught Asako to repudiate the Japanese subject, which effectively compelled her to sever it from her body. The fact that her body confines her to this specific stage of her sexual development indicates its imprisonment of this warped understanding of the Japanese body as a site of horror and disgust. Her body imprisons the racism she internalized during internment. Moreover, as a response to the violent splitting of Asako’s Japanese identity, her body ceases menstruation. This early menopause epitomizes her body’s rejection of the Japanese abject and refusal to reproduce it. Despite these restrictions, however, Asako’s motherwork of nurturing Japanese individuals and reproducing Japanese history points to her melancholic desire to sustain the culture she feels to have lost.

Melancholic Motherwork as a Means of Mediating the Effects of Internment and Sustaining its Losses

The protagonist’s position as a mother figure to her remaining family members allows her to melancholically address her internalized racism. Although Asako consciously repudiates the Japanese body, she continues to foster it through taking care of her remaining family members.

After her mother passes away, Asako assumes the maternal role of caregiver. She tends to her invalid father who needs Asako to feed him, bathe him, and change his diaper. The victim of a stroke, he is portrayed as an infant-like adult who relies on her to tend to all of his bodily functions. She also cares for her younger brother, Stum, who was born into the camp, but, since their mother passed away soon thereafter, recognizes Asako as his primary caregiver. Even as a “clumsy, emotionally-damaged” adult, Stum continues to depend on her (Sturgess 92). This motherwork elicits mixed emotions in Asako. Often she cares for Papa and Stum begrudgingly and with “shameful efficiency” (Goldman 375). On other occasions, she seemingly embraces this role by literally stepping into her mother’s shoes and wearing her clothes. These contradictory feelings can be attributed to her conflicting desires. Consciously, she yearns to detach from her culture and the losses she incurred during internment. Unconsciously, she sustains this culture and preserves her losses. Tending to her family becomes a productive platform through which Asako can address this tension.

Asako’s motherwork gestures to her complex relationship to people of her own race. Asako is sickened by the Japanese body. Her father, who is untreatably ill, confined to his bed, and “trapped in his decrepit body,” especially draws this repulsion out of her (Sakamoto 170). Essentially, he, too, is interned, in this case by his sickness. As such, he presents an image that especially horrifies Asako because it invokes memories of the dehumanizing treatment of Japanese Canadians and reminds her of her own internment. This portrait of the interned, sickly body manifests when Papa experiences a stroke.

His lips were more purple than ever, and gummy. I would not, could not press my lips to those, even to save him.

“Ne-san, do something!” Stum repeated, only louder. He put his hand on my back to push me down closer. As he did, Papa’s eyes flickered open and a whistle of air streamed from between those lips onto my cheek, and saliva bubbled up. It smelled sour. (Sakamoto 30)

The scene is a culmination of Asako’s horror towards the diseased and detained Japanese body. Her father is depicted here as a “purple,” “gummy” object, dismembered into “those” things which emit a “sour” odour and a whistling sound. He evokes the terrorizing sights, smells, and sounds of internment. These sensations trigger images of the vile treatment of Japanese Canadians—the treatment which taught her to displace her contempt from the institution responsible for it onto the individuals who were subject to it. Her horror of Papa’s interned body translates into a desire to escape internment trauma and the abject which still haunts her thirty years later. In a desperate attempt to escape the abject, she “would not, could not” save him. Despite her resistance, Stum pushes her to resuscitate Papa. She saves him even though she consciously resists doing so. This act, though performed against her will, gestures to Asako’s unconscious desire to ultimately salvage the body that is racialized as well as the traumatic history that it invokes.

Through melancholia, Asako unconsciously preserves her losses of internment as well as the violence it perpetrated. She employs the psychic process which Eng and Han (drawing on Freud) describe as the response to loss in which the subject makes “every conceivable effort to retain the lost object, to keep it alive within the domain of the psyche” by forming a psychic attachment to it (346). Sakamoto depicts Asako as engaging in this unconscious work through displaying symptoms of melancholia. Eventually, Asako’s body “stopped eating and sleeping...

There was nothing my body would take in. It was hateful to me, the thought of my body succumbing to sensation with any relief or pleasure when all I wanted was to be numb” (Sakamoto 220). Asako can neither eat nor sleep. Her body feels “hateful” and deems itself unworthy of objects which provide pleasure and relief. Such diminution of self-regard reflects Freud’s “picture of a delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority [which] is completed by sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment,” demonstrated by melancholic subjects (246). This self-denigration is a reflection of the “impoverishment of [the] ego on a grand scale,” an impoverishment that is symptomatic of the melancholic process. During melancholia, the ego identifies with the lost objects and incorporates them into itself, thus preserving them (Freud 246). In identifying with the lost objects, Asako’s ego feels impoverished, poor, and empty. Effectively, the body mimics this depletion by refusing itself pleasures such as food and sleep. This process, though straining, productively allows Asako to preserve her losses. Through melancholia, she is able to sustain the objects—losses, memories, and violences of internment—that dominant Canadian institutions seek to erase from history.

The melancholic impulse to sustain the losses of internment manifests in Asako’s unconscious state. In a haunting dream, Asako confronts her reluctance to hold onto the memories of internment and desire to mourn the event altogether. Asako sees herself back on a beach near the camp where she was detained. Her late brother, Eiji, is also there in her dream and he tells her that he is taking off for a better life. This idea seduces Asako—she wants to leave with him:

I started to run to him, but behind me Papa was struggling in his wheelchair through the sand, faintly calling: *Nani-yo, nani-yo*. That soft senile, blameless

voice.

“Eiji!” I screamed. “What about Papa?” When I looked again, Papa had toppled over his wheelchair and was squirming pitifully, like a crab. (Sakamoto 146)

In this dream, Asako is tempted to run into the water with Eiji, and abandon the burden that her father epitomizes. She desires to take off and leave Papa behind, but she stays back with him. Confined to his wheelchair and physically incapable of leaving with his children, he holds Asako back from the life she desires. She wants to start over and let go of her internment past, but as long as she remains with her father, she continues to be unconsciously reminded of this history. Asako stays with him not because of the responsibility she feels for her father, but because he embodies the negative sense of self she internalized at the time of internment and has sustained since. Significantly, she nurtures Papa in the unconscious realm just as she does in her conscious realm, which emphasizes the melancholic maternal work of sustaining internment history. Sakamoto continues to explore the conscious and unconscious work of sustaining this history and its losses within the dream state.

Interestingly, Sakamoto overlaps psychic and material borders in another dream to illustrate the layers of Asako’s work of mothering. This blending implicates the unconscious efforts of the ego, upon which Eng and Han premise their conception of racial melancholia, as well as the conscious and physical work that Asako undertakes to sustain her threatened objects. The blurring of psychic and physical realms is elsewhere expanded upon in Eng’s work where he observes that the exertion that racialized individuals feel is not isolated in either the physical *or* psychic realm, but rather that it exists at the very intersection of the two realms (*Racial*

Castration 20). Sakamoto confounds the boundaries between conscious and unconscious states through mirroring Asako's dream world with her conscious world and fusing her body with that of the objectified Other:

I was on the beach again and I was carrying Papa, his legs curling around my torso, his knees hitched under my breasts as if grown into my flesh. He was shriveled and small, smaller than in real life, shrunken to the size of a baby monkey, except that his arms were monstrously long. So long they dangled near my knees, stretched from simply hanging, from their own weight. (Sakamoto 170)

The material and psychic blend into one another as the physical bodies meld in this unconscious realm. Asako constantly carries Papa in her dreams just as she does in her conscious state through feeding and bathing him, essentially keeping him alive. Sakamoto merges their bodies together to illustrate the extent to which he is a part of Asako's identity. Papa is the abject and burden that Asako works consciously and unconsciously to retain through her work of mothering. This intersection of spaces and bodies significantly demonstrates that the work of tending to the effects of systematic racism is a collaborative effort between the ego's psychic grasp and the body's physical response, which in Asako's case takes the form of motherwork. Sakamoto explores these complementary efforts further in expanding Asako's scope of motherwork beyond the realm of her biological family members.

The Melancholic Motherwork of Reproducing Japanese Canadian History and Culture

Asako's self-positioning as a non-conventional mother figure to her young neighbour highlights the (re)productive potential of melancholic motherwork. Unlike her relationships with

Papa and Stum, which are rooted in biology, Asako's relationship with Sachi is rooted in their shared heritage. The fact that Asako consciously seeks out and establishes this maternal role is significant. This choice circumvents the physical limitations imposed upon her by internment; it demonstrates that although Asako physically cannot reproduce a Japanese subject, she can still psychologically sustain and nurture one. The non-biological maternal role she adopts is therefore a powerful site of resistance, and in some ways it resembles the West African practice of "othermothering" or "community mothering." This self-defined and self-created role, Erica Lawson explains, "enabled African Black women to use African derived conceptions of the self and the community to resist negative evaluations of Black women" (qtd. in O'Reilly 112). In creating a role for herself as Sachi's surrogate mother, Asako can perform motherwork that deviates from the work attributed to the white, normalized experience of motherhood. Asako attempts to perform exhaustive motherwork consistent with the tenets of intensive mothering by ignoring her own needs and constantly noting Sachi's carelessness, persistently scolding her for her improprieties, and continually grooming and feeding her—but Sachi spurns this scrutinizing attention. Their maternal relationship is more productively grounded in their shared heritage and the psychic work of reproducing their culture. One of the central responsibilities of the othermother, Patricia Hill Collins explains, is "to bring people along, to—in the words of the late-nineteenth century Black feminists—'uplift the race' so that the vulnerable members of the community will be able to retain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance" (132). In her position as a surrogate mother or othermother, Asako draws on her melancholically preserved history, memories, and losses of internment and shares them with Sachi, a third generation Japanese Canadian born after the event. This passing on of knowledge

enables Sachi to participate in the collective remembering of their shared history. Furthermore, Asako reproduces psychically sustained elements of their Japanese culture, most notably their language. By receiving this language, Sachi gains the tools to resist racist discourse independently. All in all, through this relationship with Sachi, Sakamoto illustrates the potential for Asako's motherwork to pass on Japanese identity and history to subsequent generations.

Asako's work of mothering Sachi entails the difficult task of relaying her melancholically preserved Japanese Canadian history and culture. Like the majority of internment survivors, Asako avoids discussing the experience altogether. In an interview with Pilar Cuder-Domínguez Sakamoto explains that the generation that was interned was muted by "a conspiracy of silence" and immobilized by a "sense of shame by association... an impulse to distance oneself from their Japanese identity" (140). Asako embodies this immobilization, consciously repressing herself and severing the Japanese abject, but according to Sakamoto, Sachi "unsettles everything" ("A Sequel" 4). Sachi carefully employs her own quiet authority to coax Asako out of the conspiracy of silence and shame. On more occasions than not, Asako concedes to Sachi's requests to "Go on, please... I want you to." Asako does this because there "was a yearning in the way she said this" (Sakamoto 166). Both mother and daughter participate in the maternal work of tapping into the unconscious and reproducing the history preserved within in it. Asako sustains the objects, and Sachi helps to uncover them. This work that thoroughly engages them is difficult and draining. Asako describes it as "exhaust[ing] me, calling up this memory, as if from the motion of the dream, though I could not at the moment remember the ride itself, how the little car moves. I found myself unable to continue; the words and pictures in my mind had vanished" (Sakamoto 81). Returning to her traumatic past is exhausting and requires great mental

strength. She is able to recover the images and words momentarily as they flash before her. Like a roller coaster ride, though, the sights quickly fade into the background; they recede back into her unconscious where they remain preserved. Although the very work of summoning these memories is difficult, Sakamoto shows that it is critical. In sporadically conjuring and sharing them, the women keep this history from being erased by North American discourses of “exceptionalism and democratic myths of liberty, individualism, and inclusion [which] force a misremembering of these events” (Eng and Han 347). This reproduction ensures that the collective memories and experiences of Japanese Canadians remain a part of the community’s collective unconscious and persist across generations.

In her motherwork of reproducing Japanese culture, Asako also imparts to Sachi bits of Japanese language which help her establish a positive cultural and sexual identity. Asako, Howells notes, “preserves a sense of cultural identity... by scattering Japanese words and phrases” unconsciously in her conversations with Sachi (131). The pre-adolescent girl is especially intrigued by anatomical words. She probes Asako for them and then shares them with her friend Tam. The two pre-teenagers engage in “show and shares,” a game in which they reveal to one another parts of their bodies and their corresponding names. These exploratory games, Sakamoto explains, portray “a very positive sense of teenagers and their sexuality involved, their discovery of sexuality, but their cultural and linguistic background is also entwined with that” (“Surviving History” 139). Sachi and Tam discover themselves in an intimate way that is meaningful to them. These games celebrate their sexuality and culture, allowing them to understand the Japanese body as an object of pride and pleasure. They form a positive sense of self that stands in contrast to Asako’s negative perception of the racialized body. Sakamoto

conveys optimism through Sachi, who embodies hope for subsequent generations to move beyond the shame of the Japanese identity and racialization of internment.

Through motherwork, Asako helps Sachi to develop a positive sense of sexuality; however, she also subversively tends to her own stunted development. Sachi is approximately the same age as Asako was when her physiology was disrupted, which means that they are both psychically in a pre-pubescent sexual state. Asako's attitude towards reproductive language reflects this immaturity. As she shares these Japanese words for anatomical parts, Asako refers to them as

secret words... I'd learned them long ago, from the schoolyard at Japanese school in Port Dover, from behind the ofuro in camp, the boys and girls coming out of the bath wrapped in their towels, tittering. Eiji even told me some. As a girl I stored them up, whispering them to myself under the covers at night. (Sakamoto 82-83, emphasis mine)

As this passage shows, Asako associates her reproductive parts and the Japanese words for them with stolen moments and hushed tones. They elicit shame in her because they remind her of her own inexperience and incestuous curiosity. Having never been able to move beyond her and Eiji's childish games, she maintains immature and shameful understandings of sexuality and the body. Problematically, Asako follows Sachi and Tam and watches them from afar. In narrating these sequences, she protests, it "wasn't that I'd planned it, to stay and watch... The sunlight veiled by the clouds, my skin protected from any harshness as I crouched. I could go dizzy watching them watch each other" (Sakamoto 83). This behavior is similar to that of Asako's younger self, when she used to sneak behind the ofuro at the camp and steal the "secret words"

from the other children. Asako's voyeurism is indeed inappropriate, especially considering her relationship with Eiji, but her observations are not of a pedophilic nature. Her voyeurism is an attempt to assuage her own pre-pubescent curiosity. Though inappropriate, watching them allows her to revisit and unlearn her internalized racism. Asako is conditioned to be repulsed by the Japanese body, but by watching them establish "somehow more 'pure,' less shameful culture" than the one Asako has internalized, she sees for herself that a positive sense of Japanese culture and sexuality are possible (Stone 40). This subversive, voyeuristic aspect of Asako's motherwork enables her to confront her own prejudices and begin to divorce what Howells calls the "monstrosity" of the racialized body.

Irresolution: A Melancholic Treatment of Internment History

The productive motherwork of mediating trauma and reproducing loss is undercut by the novel's tragic murder, an event that parallels Asako's experience of internment. Just as Asako loses Eiji early on in her life, Sachi loses Tam as they begin their sexual explorations. Tam and the rest of his family are murdered by his father, Yano. Yano is depicted as a kamikaze⁹ who fulfills this role when, upon finding out that his wife is having an affair with her white boss, murders the entire family, the lover, and himself out of disgrace. Also like Asako, Sachi refuses to let go of her loved object and forms a melancholic attachment to it. Though this melancholic attachment productively sustains the object, Eng and Han explain, it can also lead to some unsettling repercussions in the subject. In internalizing and

⁹ "Kamikaze" is a Japanese word that literally translates into "divine wind" and refers to WWII Japanese suicide pilots. At first, according to the *Oxford Companion to World War II*, kamikazes volunteered out of honour and embraced this form of attack with pride. Soon after, the act became compulsory (*A Dictionary of World History*). In Sakamoto's novel, Yano is directly referred to as a "kamikaze" on multiple accounts (21, 86, 134, 197) and personally invokes them on others (257, 282). Scholars such as Andrea Stone draw parallels between Yano and the kamikaze figure.

identifying with the lost object, the melancholic is able to preserve it but only as a type of haunted, ghostly identification. That is, the melancholic consumes the emptiness of the lost object, identifies with this emptiness, and thus participates in his or her own self-denigration. (Eng and Han 346)

As Eng and Han state, the melancholic preservation of the object causes the ego to identify with the object so that it feels impoverished, leading the subject to abase herself. Sachi's ego identifies with her lost loved object, Tam, but maintains him only as a ghostly haunting. She embodies the object's emptiness and becomes self-denigrating. Like Asako, Sachi is also subject to racialization by dominant institutions, which causes her to internalize the blame for Tam's loss. She maintains, "I did it... I showed Tam his mom in the woods, with that man" (277). Sakamoto literally mirrors Sachi's loss and self-incrimination with Asako's experience of loss by having Asako echo Sachi's self-blame, "It was because of me... I told Yano about the woods. About [his wife.] I told him" (Sakamoto 277). Both women melancholically sustain loss by internalizing their loved objects, but they are also subject to systematic racism, which coerces them into assuming blame for their losses. This pattern of self-incrimination serves as a reminder of the ways in which dominant institutions offload responsibility onto those who are subject to it. Asako and Sachi fail to recognize the larger systems that incite their losses. They disregard Yano's deeply harboured resentment towards the institutions that incarcerated Japanese Canadians, his ongoing subjection to racialization and discrimination, his protests for redress which are scorned and mocked, and, perhaps most troubling of all, his pride in maintaining a 'pure' Japanese family untainted by the white man. By mirroring the present-day tragedy with internment history Sakamoto raises questions about the accountability of internment's racialized

violence as well as its ongoing effects.

Through the novel's reoccurring themes of violence and loss, *The Electrical Field* unsettles the apparently already mourned and resolved history of internment. This work of fiction narrates the ways in which internment continues to afflict Japanese Canadians—those who were interned as well as their families and communities. It melancholically “returns to a deliberately forgotten episode in Canada’s recent past that casts its uncanny shadows over the present” (Hollows 125). This return to the past and its emphasis on loss are not meant to victimize individuals but rather to consider how one might productively move forward from loss. Recalling a passage from Sakamoto that I quoted earlier in this chapter, I read melancholic motherwork in this novel as one example of a “move beyond the collective malaise in an effort to rethink connections between history, responsibility, and social change” (qtd. in Howells 126). The novel revisits internment history and narrates its violence and loss as a way of inciting a re-evaluation of who and what are responsible for the consequences and after-effects of internment. *The Electrical Field* insists on a melancholic preservation rather than a mourning of this history. It shows that the preservation of internment’s memories and losses rejects the erasure of the historical injustice. It suggests that by holding on to the past, the nation can more productively move forward.

Yet, the novel is permeated with despair, which makes it all the more difficult to answer the question of how one can progress from loss. This chapter has argued that the work of melancholic mothering can be politically productive. Melancholic mothering enables mother figures to confront their psychological and physical responses to internment. It also enables individuals to draw from their melancholically preserved heritage and losses in order to

reproduce them and pass them on to future generations. *The Electrical Field's* mother figure tends to her physical and psychological effects and melancholically sustains the losses she incited as a result of internment within her psyche. All of these acts of mothering reiterate that remembrance is a form of resistance and offer hope for subsequent generations. Melancholic mothering draws on connections between history and responsibility to effect change.

Chapter 2: The Motherwork of Sustaining, Strengthening, and Sharing Loss Across Generations in Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*

Introduction

In this chapter I examine the ways that mothers and daughters productively sustain, strengthen, and share melancholic grief as a form of transgenerational melancholic motherwork in Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*. This novel depicts each of the three women in the Kiyokawa/Tonkatsu matrilineal line as preserving her losses through melancholic internalization in a sense that is comparable to Asako's internalization that I discussed in the previous chapter. These women nourish and pass on these losses through uniquely expressive melancholic acts. The grandmother, Naoe, mutters in Japanese, relaying family history and folk tales; the mother, Keiko, performs Japanese maternal traditions for the other women, specifically washing her mother's hair and cleaning her daughter's ears; and the daughter, Murasaki, cooks traditional Japanese meals, physically and psychically feeding her family elements of their melancholically preserved culture. This nurturing and passing on of grief have the effect of reinforcing the losses in which these characters are already collectively invested. This notion that melancholia can be passed on from one generation to the next is developed by Eng and Han as part of their theory of racial melancholia. As these scholars explain, "if the losses suffered by the first generation of immigrants are not resolved and mourned in the process of assimilation...then the melancholia that ensues from this generation can be transferred onto the second generation" (352-353). In keeping with this aspect of the theory of racial melancholia, I argue that in order for Naoe, Keiko, and Murasaki to sustain their losses, they melancholically internalize and transfer them,

taking care to also nourish the losses in a way that affirms rather than replenishes or “fills up” the absences they have internalized. Building on Eng and Han’s theory, I also suggest that Goto’s novel presents melancholic transference as a powerful mode of motherwork that sustains and strengthens individual losses of Japanese culture and identity in the face of national and political institutions that attempt to erase them.

The novel’s mother figures safeguard their threatened Japanese heritage by harbouring it within their own and one another’s psyches. The protagonists risk losing their personal and familial history to ideals of imperialism and experiences of immigration; they also face the erasure of their Japanese identities to the process of assimilation. To protect these objects, the women internalize them and preserve them within the psyche, likely concluding, as Eng and Han suggest, that “if the loved object is not going to live out there...then it is going to live inside of me” (365). This internalization ensures that the objects, which are racialized and, as such, subordinated in dominant white Canadian culture, persist within the women’s psyches. Thus the “socially disparaged objects—racially and sexually deprived others—can live on in the psychic realm,” and Naoe, Keiko, and Murasaki can unconsciously protect what the external threatens to obliterate (Eng and Han 364). Moreover, by melancholically transferring their individually preserved objects, the mothers and daughters can invest in one another’s losses. This ensures that the objects do not diminish in the unconscious of any single individual, but rather are supported by the psychic efforts of many.

This melancholic motherwork of internally preserving and transferring diasporic losses forms a community of grief. The community allows the threatened losses to survive within a collective realm of psyches and demonstrates “a militant refusal on the part of the ego—better

yet, a series of egos—to let go” (Eng and Han 365). This community is especially critical because it allows not only the mothers to psychically preserve their losses, but also for the mothers to pass the losses onto other generations so that they can collectively reinforce them. Here, it might be useful to turn to Eng and Han’s negotiation of communal melancholia in AIDS activism, which draws on Judith Butler’s and Douglas Crimp’s respective works on melancholia, and also José Esteban Muñoz’s discussion of community (365). Understanding that the AIDS movement is a unique phenomenon with distinct political concerns, the critical analyses on the community of melancholia that these critics offer provide us a point of entry into the transference and negotiation of melancholia as motherwork. Butler and Crimp contend that the loss of a public language to mourn the tragic deaths necessitates the turn away from mourning and towards melancholia (Eng and Han 365). Moreover, melancholia’s psychic process protects threatened losses and allows those who have fallen ill to AIDS to live on internally (Eng and Han 365). Applying this logic to racially melancholic motherhood suggests, as I have already indicated, that the mothers’ internalization of their threatened gendered and racialized identities protects them against the erasure of their Japanese culture, heritage, and history. By internalizing these losses, the mothers can, in Sandra Almeida’s words, challenge “racial and gendered alienation and abjection” (48). Further building on the AIDS activism movement, Muñoz emphasizes the community of support in which, “we do not mourn just one lost object or other, but we also mourn as a ‘whole’—or, put another way, as a contingent and temporary collection of fragments that is experiencing a loss of its parts” (qtd. in Eng and Han 365). This sentiment also describes the collective nature of melancholic motherwork apparent in Goto’s novel, where mothers do not just preserve their individual losses of racial identity. In *Chorus of Mushrooms*,

rather, mothers and daughters preserve their culture as parts of a disparate whole; it is a collective effort to sustain the heritage that assimilation diminishes. Through melancholic motherwork, then, mothers and their daughters can protect the culture under threat by internalizing it, and they can reproduce their culture by transferring it across generations.

This chapter examines the motherwork of internalizing, strengthening, and transferring loss in the following sections. The first part examines the losses of subjectivity and freedom that result from Japan's imperialist initiatives in the late 1930s. It discusses Naoe's melancholic preservation of these losses, as well as her transference of them through assertions of anger. The second section looks at Naoe's and Keiko's experiences of immigration in Canada, where pressures to assimilate threaten to displace the women's Japanese heritage with ideals of whiteness. The mother figures counter the assimilationist efforts they experience through sustaining and sharing their losses, specifically through Naoe's speech. The third section examines the motherwork of sharing grief and strengthening melancholia. It analyzes the physical acts of introjection, including Keiko's hair washing and ear cleaning and Murasaki's Japanese cooking, all of which echo and thus reinforce the melancholic work of internalizing loss. I maintain that Goto expands on Eng and Han's notion of melancholic transference by portraying this transference as a productive form of motherwork that not only sustains loss, but further strengthens it. This chapter examines the preservation and transference of loss, beginning with the family's diasporic history.

Incurring, Internalizing, and Inheriting the Losses of Imperialism

The traumatic losses of each character in *Chorus of Mushrooms* are delicately woven into

the novel like silk. Naoe recounts her privileged, bitter, and horrifying days leading up to and during WWII in Japan. She immerses readers in her world of fine silk kimonos and quilts, possessions that indicate her lavish lifestyle. Naoe lived as a member of the wealthy Kiyokawa family, which thrived off of the “pain and the hardship of the villagers who only rented the land they had worked for fourteen generations but never owned for their labours” (Goto 10). Generations of being exploited drives the villagers to trick her father into signing over all of his property, after which point he and his family are exiled. As they quickly pack up their things, Naoe’s mother tells her to “leave the silks, they are too fine” (Goto 9). With a swift abandonment of such finery, Naoe begins to incur her series of losses.

Following this loss of their home and class, Naoe enters into an arranged marriage with Makoto Dai, a man she resents and blames for their oppressive and destructive lifestyle. The two move across China so that he can participate in Japan’s occupation and, in Makoto’s naïve words, “build bridges across the whole country! The bridges will be a symbol of good will between our people and the Chinese” (47). While her husband recites this propaganda, Naoe faces the difficult realization that Japanese soldiers will cross “his bridges of goodwill to slaughter their inland cousins,” causing her to question her own contribution to this violence (47). She confronts the bitterness of unquestioningly managing their household and implicitly participating in Japan’s imperialism. Without autonomy, Naoe is a shadow of a person reduced to mere functions: politically abiding citizen, obliging wife, and dutiful matron of the Dai household. In essence, her body becomes a site of colonization itself. The burden of it is spelled out in her name: Naoe Dai, “the spelling different, but the weight of the word in sound would have been enough to plague me. Naoe die” (38). The weight of her marriage and subjugated roles

threaten to crush her. An alternative to this oppressive lifestyle, she meditates, would have been to reject the institution of marriage altogether; she “could have refused, could have stayed home, could have swung from the rafters by a long silk cloth” (25). Naoe could have refused to marry, but this “option” is not a viable one. The implication is that a woman in this climate who refuses to marry chooses no life at all. The choice is equivalent to committing suicide. These are the “options” from which Naoe has to choose. Wealth, happiness, and liberty are no longer at Naoe’s fingertips. She faces dispossession within and exile from her community, loses her family and body to Japan’s colonization, and is disempowered by the gendered roles that confine her to an unfavorable marriage.

As a result of her subjugated position, Naoe grows inhibited and internalizes her bitterness as well as her losses. In this oppressive, unsettling time, she cannot defy the systems and people in power. Naoe acknowledges that the “words of one woman would not have turned the marching boots of men, but the pain of not having spoken, of not bothering to ask questions, still aches inside of me now... Bitterness turned inward and I didn’t care for the things around me. Not even Keiko” (Goto 46). With no outlet to air her frustrations, she turns inwards; she internalizes her resentment and her losses of family, body, and liberty. As a result, she disengages with her physical world and loses all interest in the things around her, including her daughter, Keiko. These symptoms are consistent with Freud’s distinguishing features of melancholia, which include “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings” (Freud 244). Naoe’s rejection and resentment of the external realm manifest as a melancholic turn inward, in which she

withdraws into her psychic realm and brings her loved lost objects with her.

While the internalization of her losses usefully sustains them within her psyche, the bitterness that Naoe maintains and manifests is also productive. Dominant mothering ideologies demand that mothers ignore their own needs and tend to those of their children, but Goto shows that tending to her mother's psychic health is just as crucial to the mother as it is helpful for her daughter. When the mother represses her symptoms, she confines the melancholically preserved losses to her internal realm and isolates herself with her grief. Conversely, when she manifests her melancholic symptoms, she sustains her losses while allowing others to share in her melancholia. The following passage illustrates Naoe's repression and eventual manifestation of her bitterness, a manifestation which enables Keiko to absorb and partake in her mother's grief:

Nothing. I said nothing. Piled small bowls, dishes, *tokkuri*, *ochoko*, ivory *ohashi*, cluttered to the kitchen. Too tired, too angry to heat water to wash them, only left to harden in the tub, scurry of cockroach, one cockroach seen meant ten unseen. Keiko tugging at my sleeve, my *obi*, Makoto crying so weak like Otōsan, Keiko tugging me, and me saying nothing nothing NOTHING. I threw the *futon* down from the cupboards and made up our blankets. Keiko lay between us. Her Otōsan weeping and I, I was a silent *katamari* of hate.

Such a great anger I had. I had it for so many years. Am I angry still, I wonder and stretch my hands to feel. (Goto 39)

The subjectless fragment and sharp sentences that set off this passage display Naoe's strenuous work to contain the grief inside of her. The repetition of "nothing" in these curt sentences

conveys a self-repressive effort, an unwillingness to acknowledge her bitter feelings. The subsequent series of subjectless fragments depicts the compounding pressure of her domestic role that swallows up the speaker's sense of self. The speaker reduces herself to the objective pronoun "me," as if she risks consumption by the repressive nature of her grief and the gendered expectation of domesticity. The pounding silence together with the piling dishes, scurrying cockroaches, and others' needs completely dominates the speaker until her grief, anger, and resentment materialize and stack up, as "nothing nothing NOTHING." This unpunctuated repetition, peaked with capital letters, represents the tipping and breaking point for Naoe's self-repression. The melancholic anger that she harbors externalizes and manifests as an expletive. Following this cascade of "nothing's" the subject "I" re-appears, indicating the return of the self, as "I" occurs three times in the last three sentences, compared to only once in the first six sentences. By releasing her pent-up anger, Naoe no longer buries her sense of self. Her subjectivity returns as an assertion of her melancholic resistance. Just as Naoe refuses to let go of the losses of her family, body, and liberty, she refuses to repress herself and her resentment. She defiantly throws the *futon* down, over boils her husband's *sake*, and serves it to him even though it tastes like "vinegar and urine" (39). Keiko takes in these aggressive assertions with her "big round black eyes" and no longer tugs at her mother's sleeve or obi for a response (39). She feels her mother's anguish and absorbs it as she lays next to her that night. Both mother and daughter can "stretch [their] hands and feel" the palpable grief emanating from Naoe (39). In absorbing her mother's grief, Keiko "functions as the placeholder for her mother's depression" (Eng and Han 353). She incorporates her mother's melancholic bitterness as well as its source: the losses of cultural ideals, family history, and personal subjectivity. These objects, which are preserved

inside of Naoe, enter and become a part of Keiko. Their shared melancholia binds the women psychically and enables them to support one another through further difficulties.

Speaking Over the Imposed Silence of Immigration and Assimilation

This section examines the ways in which Naoe and Keiko soon return to melancholia in their responses to the new losses they incur in Canada as a result of their immigration and the pressure to assimilate that they experience in their new home. After the bombing of Nagasaki, the family immigrates to Canada for safety. Their traumatic experiences of dislocation and immigration situate them in a state of suspension where they cannot fully identify as Japanese or Canadian. This estrangement from their native and foreign countries demonstrates what Eng and Han refer to as “a double loss”—their position in relation to both nations is unstable (357). In order to identify and gain social recognition as ‘Canadians,’ the characters must sever their diasporic losses of familial and cultural histories and assimilate. This contingent citizenship threatens their attachments to Japanese culture and induces mixed emotions, such as “[a]mbivalence, rage, and anger [which] are the internalized refractions of an ecology of whiteness bent on the obliteration of cherished minority subjectivities” (Eng and Han 365). Diasporic individuals like Naoe and Keiko experience the psychological tension between their own desire to govern losses and the dominant structures’ erasure of them. Keiko negotiates this tension by subscribing to dominant ideals and consciously working towards assimilation, but through their shared melancholia, she and Naoe melancholically sustain the Japanese culture that is under threat.

Naoe represents the Japanese heritage and identity that Keiko consciously represses but

psychically relies upon. After the family immigrates to Canada, Keiko continues to preserve her mother's losses while she also incurs her own. She melancholically internalizes her Japanese identity and works towards assimilation. Desperate to prove that she is "as white as her neighbour," Keiko commits to mimicking whiteness (Goto 29). Naoe, on the other hand, is fed up with repressing herself and performing yet another role. From her chair that blocks the entrance of the house, she confronts every person that walks by with a greeting or story in Japanese, thereby not allowing the family's Japanese roots to go unnoticed. She does so with humour, noting that no one moves in their house without "[h]earing my voice. Take no notice, I say... I'll nod and smile. Welcome! Welcome! Into this pit of dust. This bowl of heat. *Ohairi kudasai! Dōzo ohairi kudasai*" (4). Though there is an air of lightheartedness to her greetings, they exemplify a fiercely defiant mode of motherwork. She rejects the nationalist ideals that attempt to silence her into submission and erase her family's culture by literally speaking out against them. Naoe ensures that their home is a noisy site of resistance that cannot be censored. In this way, Naoe's dominant presence contradicts Keiko's attempts to deny their diasporic history. Murasaki observes her mother's and grandmother's conflicting interests and notes that it is "easy to assimilate if your grandmother is skinny enough to be stuffed in a closet. Not that mom ever did that and not that Obāchan would ever allow it" (168). As Murasaki points out, even though Keiko protests Naoe's refusal to assimilate and contemplates finding her a retirement home, she never acts on these thoughts. The family's history and culture, in the form of Naoe's presence and voice, permeate the house, insistently rejecting pressures to assimilate.

As is apparent in the above examples, for Naoe, speech is a form of motherwork through which she can share her losses. Naoe relays family history mixed in with folk tales. She mutters

them constantly, always beginning with “Mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukashi,” the Japanese equivalent of “once upon a time,” and launching into her blended stories. In flooding the house with Japanese words, histories, and fairytales, she breathes new life into these elements of her culture, creatively reimagining her memories of their motherland. Her granddaughter, Murasaki, yearns for these intriguing stories though she cannot understand the language in which they are spoken. She seeks out her grandmother and “places her head in my bony lap and I begin to speak my words” (15). Murasaki desires to connect with her grandmother and their Japanese heritage, and she absorbs Naoe’s words to make these connections. Naoe discerns that Murasaki “cannot understand the words that I speak, but she can read the lines between my brow, the creases beside my mouth” (15). Murasaki interprets and internalizes her grandmother’s lines, creases, and sounds, openly inheriting the grief that Naoe relays because it fuels her longing for the culture she knows little about. Through her incessant muttering and storytelling, Naoe transfers her melancholia across generations onto Murasaki. While Murasaki and Naoe bond through Japanese language, Keiko rejects it altogether. She is set on assimilation and “forgets” the language. Naoe deliberates, “I mutter and mutter [...] I speak my words in Japanese and my daughter will not hear them. The words that come from our ears, our mouths, they collide in the space between us” (Goto 4). Naoe wants to communicate her grief with Keiko through speech. The Japanese history and identity that Naoe summons with her words, however, bring back attachments that Keiko shuns. At one point, she accuses Naoe, declaring: “You sit there and mutter and taunt me in Japanese just for spite” (Goto 21). Here and elsewhere in the novel, Keiko resents her mother for impeding her conscious work of assimilating the family.

Keiko represents the racial minority subject who works tirelessly to mimic whiteness and

achieve assimilation. She anglicizes her name to Kay, cooks only Western food, and unlearns her native tongue. Like the “Marginal Man,” a term coined by Stanley Sue and Derald W Sue, Keiko is the figure who “faithfully subscribes to the ideals of assimilation only through an elaborate self-denial of the daily acts of institutionalized racism directed against him” (Eng and Han 348). Keiko denies her own subjection to racial prejudice while at the same time conforming to national ideals of whiteness. This “untenable contradiction,” Sue and Sue argue, causes the Marginal Man to display “an uncomfortable understanding of his utter disenfranchisement from these democratic ideals” (qtd. in Eng and Han 349). Keiko denies the systemic causes of her disenfranchisement and, much like the mother figure discussed in the previous chapter, internalizes the blame for her own subjection to racism. If others are pointing out the differences, then it must be because she is failing to conceal them. The family’s ability to mimic whiteness is a barometer for its success in this country. Though, as Homi Bhabha points out, mimicry is condemned to failure since “mimicry must continually reproduce its slippages, its excesses, its differences” (126). The family’s integration into dominant society is, and can only be, a partial one. Keiko and her family cannot gain access to the dominant group and its inherent full subjectivity. She thus represses her failure to achieve whiteness and gain acceptance into the dominant group, so that she can continue striving for complete assimilation in vain.

By emphasizing Canada’s contradictory ideals of multiculturalism, Goto illustrates how this policy actually functions to render impossible complete assimilation for people of colour. She highlights how Canadian institutions continue to alienate racialized individuals even in their efforts to seem inclusive. Murasaki’s Sunday School, for example, boasts of accepting all races, with its stereotypical display of children including “Indians with feathers and black boys with

curly hair wearing only shorts and yellow people with skinny eyes. And a blonde girl with long eyelashes and a normal dress on” (Goto 59). The teacher preaches sameness since “‘Jesus doesn’t see any difference at all. He loves you all the same.’ [Murasaki] thought Jesus must be pretty blind if he thought everybody was the same” (59). This language of sameness is a hollow discourse that merely serves to emphasize the privileged position of those who employ it. The fact that Murasaki’s teacher has the choice to “overlook” and tolerate racial difference illustrates that she can turn away from the racial prejudice that people of colour experience everyday. At one point the teacher pulls Keiko aside to speak about the “delicate” matter of their theatrical production in which Murasaki is cast in the lead role (176). As she explains, Alice is an “English girl with lovely blonde hair. And strictly for the play, you understand, Muriel will have to have blonde hair or no one will know what part she is playing. You simply cannot have an Alice with black hair” (177). This claim is filled with contradiction. The teacher is willing to cast Murasaki in the lead role, giving her the apparent opportunity to fit in with the rest of her class, but only under the condition that she change herself completely. She literally enforces assimilation by indirectly requiring Murasaki to don a blonde wig. Meanwhile, the teacher can herald the minority figure in the lead role and proudly claim that she is accepting of all races, “thus reducing [her] to a mere emblem of a marginalized group as well as the symbol of the speaker’s tolerance” (Libin 97). The façade of multiculturalism benefits those already in power and continues to subordinate those who are not. People who possess racial privilege, like Murasaki’s teacher, can employ multicultural discourse to prove their benevolence; by the same token, they can also use it to reinforce the marginalized statuses of racialized individuals. Tolerance, Goto demonstrates, is a convenient tool for dominant institutions to discretely reinforce racial

discrimination and impose assimilation.

In my reading of this novel, Keiko is able to consciously submit to this racialized discourse because she unconsciously sustains her Japanese culture and identity through her psychic bond with her mother. Keiko becomes distraught, however, when Naoe abandons her post by the door and leaves the house. The departure represents not only the loss of her mother, but also the loss of Japanese culture. Naoe's leaving signifies a rupture in Keiko's identity from her Japanese self. She has only her Canadian identity to fall upon, but even that is incomplete since she cannot achieve full assimilation. Without her mother, Keiko becomes "half a person"; a significant part of her preserved Japanese identity is now gone (Goto 207). Keiko consequently becomes even more reclusive and falls into a state of depression. The state is akin to "a nervous breakdown. Well nothing diagnosed or formally said, she just refused to leave her room. She stayed in bed for three months and never opened the curtains. Never turned on the lights" (Goto 127). Her depression gestures to her unconscious acknowledgement that a significant loss has taken place within. She incurs the partial loss of her Japanese self that is psychically preserved within Naoe. A melancholic part of her is missing, and she needs to replenish it in order to continue psychically resisting assimilation. Keiko's physical reaction to depression, much like Naoe's assertion of resentment, are difficult but necessary expressions. Keiko takes to bed for three months and gives vent to her despair; this is productive not only because the mother figure is tending to her personal psychic health, but also because it allows her daughter to share in her mother's grief.

Goto depicts the continued maternal transference of the family's unresolved grief by passing it onto the youngest generation. After Murasaki's only model of her Japanese heritage

disappears and her mentor for acculturation becomes despondent, she assumes what remains. In tending to her depressed mother, Murasaki “had had visions of [her] going back to school and parties on the weekends and basketball tournaments, but the future looked dim and [she] became depressed. Not the ideal emotional state for someone who is trying to nurse someone else out of a depression” (Goto 129). Goto depicts another moment of transmission here, the moment where Murasaki’s own goals of returning to school and attending social functions become dim. Her own aspirations are displaced by the unresolved grief of her mother, and effectively that of her grandmother as well. Murasaki inherits their losses of Japanese identity and assimilation, or what Pavlina Radia calls “the family’s immigrant trauma,” and enters into her mother and grandmother’s community of grief (190). Though Murasaki describes this state as unideal for someone like herself who is trying to nurse her mother out of depression, it is actually very productive. Within this psychic community, she can access her mother’s and grandmother’s trauma and grief. Their melancholia functions as a form of connectivity between all three generations of women.

Goto depicts a literal psychic community in which Murasaki can reach out to her grandmother and communicate her grief. Naoe’s departure ruptures Murasaki’s Japanese identity, just as it does Keiko’s. Murasaki relied on her grandmother’s Japanese words, family history, and mythical folktales to feed her melancholic desire for their shared culture. Having lost her grandmother’s consultations and inherited her mother’s depression, Murasaki needs a place to express her grief and tap into the other women’s melancholia. Goto depicts a psychic space for her to do so. It may be useful to read this psychic space as parallel with bell hooks’s definition of a “homeplace,” a domestic realm historically used by African Americans that functions as

“shelter from racist aggression” as well as “a crucial site for organizing [and] forming political solidarity” (271). The homeplace allows people of colour to escape racist institutions and establish mutual support. Reading Goto’s psychic space as an altered homeplace, then, highlights its political potential. The mother figures enter this realm to safely express their grief without exposing it to the threat of the external world. In this internal space they offer each other the support to which they might not have access. In these ways, the psychic community becomes a site of collective resistance. The following passage illustrates Murasaki and Naoe’s occupation of this space.

(Murasaki: Obāchan. Obāchan, help. Help me

Naoe: *Ara*, what is it child?

Murasaki: Sometimes I’m so lonely I almost can’t stand it. I get this ache here,
and here, and I get this wobbly tremor in my throat and it makes me feel
like I’ll start crying again and never stop.

[...]

Naoe: [...] The pain is hard, but it is important. You’ll see.

Murasaki: I don’t want to hear that now. All I can see is this awful pain inside.

Naoe: And you will be strong. (Goto 161)

Goto narrates the psychic homeplace within parentheses and between negative spaces which disrupt the positive linear space of the novel's structure. Her use of negative space and brackets signals to the reader that the characters are departing from their linear narrative (or external realm) and are entering into their own homeplace (internal, psychic realm). Murasaki telepathically communicates her grief as an ineffable ache. The fact that she is able to openly express her pain in this psychic realm but cannot dislodge the tremor from her throat and articulate her pain in the physical realm highlights that she does not expose her melancholia to external threats. She sustains it within the safety of the psychic space where she shares it with her grandmother. Naoe listens patiently, sympathizes with her pain, and reassures her that this pain is important. It is a part of their identity, and it will make her strong. This pain is symptomatic of their melancholia, through which they preserve their heritage. The safety, sympathy, and support in this homeplace demonstrate a sense of psychic solidarity, illustrating that Murasaki does not have to confront expectations to assimilate and deny her heritage alone or even experience melancholic grief in isolation. Together the mother figures form an unconscious collective resistance—a resistance whereby each woman contributes in her own way.

The Motherwork of Reinforcing Melancholia and Feeding Loss

Keiko and Murasaki respectively practise Japanese maternal rituals and prepare traditional Japanese meals as modes of transferring grief and strengthening their melancholic states and preserved lost objects. Keiko's negotiation of her grief is subtle and nearly indiscernible; she does not articulate or verbally acknowledge her losses (in either the physical or the psychic realm), which indicates that her melancholic preservation is thoroughly concealed

and, therefore, safe. Between Keiko and the other women, “differences remain. But there are times when one can touch the other without language to disrupt [them]” (Goto 25). Keiko conveys her melancholia and connects with the other women through touch, as this quotation indicates, rather than through language. She does so specifically through performing intimate rituals that mothers and daughters share in Japan. Goto depicts a scene when the women still lived together and Keiko washes Naoe’s hair. Through this process, the women transfer their grief, which is evident as Naoe consumes “the pleasure of [Keiko’s] touch magnified when I feel without my eyes” and Keiko’s “belly absorbs my pain” (Goto 42). Keiko externalizes the grief she feels in her touch, and through their intimate contact, passes it onto Naoe. In turn, Naoe embodies her grief and when Keiko grazes her scalp and belly, she absorbs her mother’s pain. The figural inside/outside nature of this ritual mimics the melancholic process. Each woman externalizes her grief, and the other absorbs and internalizes it. They pass their shared grief back and forth, reinforcing one another’s melancholia. The continuous transference is depicted as an extremely pleasurable process, where the usually talkative Naoe responds with faint onomatopoeic expressions such as “Ahhhhhhhh” and “Hmmmmmmmmmmmm” (42, 43). Through these wordless expressions she blissfully receives her daughter’s melancholia and shares her own through touch. This rejuvenation soothes the women’s grief, reinforcing the productive work of melancholia.

Keiko also reinforces her daughter’s melancholic grief through the enactment of Japanese maternal rituals. The youngest of the Tonkatsu women inherited the family’s grief, but without her grandmother’s stories it dwindles. Murasaki laments, “[t]here is a hollow in my hearing that I must fill on my own” (Goto 32). In keeping with her melancholic state and her investment in the

transfer of melancholic losses, Keiko does not fill this hollow with words. Instead she engages her daughter in the intimate practice of ear cleaning further emptying out the hollow of Murasaki's ears by inserting it with a bamboo pick. Murasaki describes the exquisite "thrill of bamboo piercing fragile tissue, tearing through tender flesh" and "the longing for the first touch, the unknown" it incites. She "hovered in that delicate place between anticipation and intense pleasure" (156). This introjection of the bamboo is another melancholic transference, in which Keiko places an object of their culture—an extension of her loss—into her daughter's ear. Murasaki receives the object, internalizing it melancholically as she did her grandmother's words, and thereby openly inherits their shared grief. The process ends with the sensation of "a warm breath around [her], a cloud of bees, a palmful of seeds" (156). The fecundity of this imagery illustrates Murasaki's rejuvenation and contrasts the emptiness she felt prior to this transference. In this instance, Keiko's motherwork fills the hollowness in Murasaki's hearing and replenishes her melancholia.

Melancholia requires constant nourishment, in this sense, because if it is not enforced, as in Keiko's case, the psyche can become debilitated and the subject can enter into a depression. Keiko's rituals are productive, but rare. Since complying so readily with assimilationist ideals, she has renounced Japanese language and food. Without such elements of one's culture to help sustain the melancholically preserved lost culture, the psyche feels hollow and becomes diminished, as demonstrated with Murasaki. Keiko's body reflects this debilitation and appears "opaque," "silver edged and thin as paper" (Goto 13). Her body's colour and vibrancy drain away as her psyche weakens. Both her body and psyche continue to grow incapacitated with her "bland diet of boiled beef and hot dogs combined with lackluster conversation comprised of

‘How was school?’ and ‘Pass the gravy boat, [which] were sad substitutes for [her] malnourished culture” (99). Though the food appeases Keiko’s physical appetite, the bland diet and lackluster conversation do not satisfy her psychic hunger. As a result, the psyche and its preservation of their culture are “malnourished,” craving cultural sustenance. For diasporic individuals like Keiko, Wenying Xu explains, their “culture’s foodways must function as a cushion from displacement and homelessness, as comfort food that momentarily transports the exiles to the ever-elusive home” (104). Ethnic food can serve as a reinforcement of the melancholically preserved culture, providing temporary relief from assimilation. Consumption, as Xu indicates, restores a sense of satisfaction of having introjected elements of one’s culture. It has the potential to be a consistent and effective form of nourishing one’s loss. Through Keiko, Goto illustrates that without this regular strengthening of melancholic loss, the internalized objects risk receding, so that the psyche becomes weakened and less effective in resisting assimilation.

Drawing on the restorative powers of food, Murasaki enriches the family’s collective melancholia and nourishes their psyches. She yearns for more than the boiled meat and monotonous conversation which inadequately stand in for the richness of their cultural food and mother tongue. Murasaki craves the taste of something Japanese, “[s]omething that would leave a rich flavour on their tongue, on their lips. Lick, then suck their fingertips. Let me feed you” (Goto 201). The physical and psychic consumption of Japanese food can revive the diminished shadows of the psyche and strengthen it. Goto demonstrates this restoration by having Murasaki prepare and feed Keiko Japanese dishes. She follows Naoe’s instructions, relayed through their telepathic conversations, and prepares elaborate meals for the family.

There were no hugs or kisses or mea culpas. There wasn’t a wellspring of words, as if

everything we never said burst forth and we forgave each other for all our shortcomings. We sat and ate. No one saying a word, just the smack of lips and tongues. We passed around the *Tonkatsu* sauce whenever it looked like someone was running out.

But it was a chrysalis time for Mom and me. Maybe for both of us. (Goto 153)

The food lures Keiko from her bedroom where she has confined herself and brings her to the communal dining table where she joins her daughter and husband. There is no elaborate discussion or rehashing of memories. Instead of apologies and words, the family members simply ingest the food. As Xu maintains, food induces solidarity among family and community members, breaking down barriers and disregarding normative expectations of acceptability (4). The noisy smacking of lips and tongues elicits the unapologetic desires and unrestrained pleasures of internalizing elements of their culture. Eating ethnic food, as Naoe describes the process, “nourishes *more than my body*. [It makes me] replete” (Goto 147, emphasis mine). Since the types of food they consume are literal products of their Japanese culture, the dishes Murasaki prepares have the capacity to feed their melancholic losses. The family members satisfy their physical appetite as well as their psychic hunger, and effectively reinvigorate their psyches. These forms of enjoyment, Xu argues, “are the very expressions of the maternal, and it is the maternal that has the power to sustain a community at a time of deep trouble and nurture it back to health” (27). Murasaki’s preparation of these meals is a form of melancholic motherwork that effectively nurses her mother out of her depression and restores her mother’s psychic health—as well as her own. Her mothering fortifies the women’s collective grief.

The family’s melancholic losses are, moreover, symbolically placed at the heart of these meals. Prominent on the dining table is the *Tonkatsu* sauce, or the sauce that is used for dressing

breaded pork. This dish is the very product that the family named itself after. It represents the family's ethnic roots and encompasses the language, traditions, and food of its heritage. The family's adoption of this meal as its surname symbolizes the melancholic preservation of the family's cultural history even as it faces diminishment. The significant passing of "the *Tonkatsu* sauce whenever it looked like someone was running out" indicates a collective strengthening of the internalized loss whenever it appears to be dwindling. Simply put, if one family member notices that another's ethnic identity or culture (represented by the sauce) decreases, then s/he replenishes it. S/he encourages the other to continue consuming the sauce, thereby continuously internalizing their culture. In this way, the family feeds its physical appetite and melancholic hunger. This nurturance by each family member helps to continually strengthen and reinforce the family's melancholia as a collective practice.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to interrogate Goto's portrayal of a maternal community of grief in which mothers and daughters internalize and transfer their losses in a way that reinforces their melancholic condition. Goto demonstrates that racial melancholia is a productive means of preserving one's threatened culture and ethnicity. By internalizing the objects, individuals can preserve them safely within the psyche. Goto also shows that mother figures who transfer grief sustain their losses transgenerationally. This transference, which she depicts through physical expressions, modes of speech, and bodily introjections, is productive for the mother as well as her descendants. It allows the mothers to tend to their own well-being and also enables others to share in her grief. Through asserting subjectivity, sharing stories, conversing psychically,

performing rituals, and preparing foods, the novel's protagonists convey their grief and strengthen their collective melancholia. Without such reinforcement, the psyche can become debilitated and weaken over time. Conversely, by collectively sustaining and strengthening melancholia, individuals can more resiliently confront political and national ideals that threaten to erase their ethnic culture and identity. The collective nature of melancholic motherwork is a powerful mode of protecting that which is threatened by external social and political forces.

Chapter 3: Melancholia and the Motherwork of Narrativization
in Madeleine Thien's *Dogs at the Perimeter*

Introduction

While my previous chapters discussed how mother characters seek to sustain their loved objects through melancholia, this chapter examines how one mother's attempts to melancholically hold on to an internalization of her own mother figure results in her abusive treatment of her son. Madeleine Thien's *Dogs at the Perimeter* is a difficult book, but it is an important one because it examines mothering relationships when everything is not okay—when the mother has not begun to recover from her losses. What does it mean for an abusive mother to be featured in a text about diaspora and constructions of race in contemporary Canada? How might one interpret the abusive mother figure? This chapter argues that one way to read Janie's abusiveness is through Melanie Klein's theory of the mother as a "bad object." In making this argument, I draw from Eng and Han's adaptation of Klein's essay "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic Depressive States" to their theory of "racial melancholia."

Like the other books I have discussed in this project, *Dogs at the Perimeter* builds a case for recognizing the melancholic process of attending to traumatic loss. The novel's protagonist, Janie, internalizes her mother figures and motherland as what Klein has called "good," safe objects, but after incurring the traumatic losses of these objects at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, she alters her internalizations of them so that they become "bad" objects. Following immigration, these internalized "bad" objects come to signify her attachment to her diasporic past and, in Eng and Han's language, seemingly "deny [the subject] her the capacity to invest in new

objects” (352). Her attachments to these “bad” objects convey an inability to form new attachments in Canada. Janie feels pressured to let go of them and build a new life, though at the same time she wants to sustain them to preserve a part of her past, lost life. This conflict, according to Eng and Han, demonstrates that immigration and assimilation “characterize a process involving not just mourning *or* melancholia but...the negotiation between mourning *and* melancholia” (353). As I touched upon in my introduction, this negotiation is interesting because while Freud completely opposes the combination of these two processes, where one is about expunging loss entirely and the other is about preserving loss, Eng and Han propose the possibility of engaging in both processes concurrently. Specifically, Eng and Han suggest that there are some occasions in which the subject can engage in a practice of mourning without ever giving up his or her own losses.

In *Dogs at the Perimeter* Janie participates in both mourning and melancholic processes. As a melancholic, Janie has buried her (“bad”) objects of mother and motherland deeply, and when she is confronted with memories of them the experience re-traumatizes her, putting her in such a state of uncontrollable fear that she physically abuses her son. In other words, Janie is so dissociated from these objects that their return completely surprises and debilitates her. But when she encounters other people’s memories of similar traumas, she engages in a process of mourning that allows her to process her losses. In my analysis of this novel, I will argue that Janie accomplishes this work of mourning through “narrativization,” which motherhood scholar Regina Edmonds defines as “the creation of narratives which elaborate on the traumatic circumstances of a migrant mother’s journey and her resettlement struggles” (51). Janie, however, does not tell her own story. Instead, she narrates stories of diaspora and loss

experienced by other people close to her—especially those of her friend Hiroji. By imagining someone else's grief, she indirectly mourns her losses while keeping them preserved and intact within her own psyche. By reading Janie as a mother figure who is subject to the traumatizing effects of diaspora and assimilation and who melancholically sustains “bad” objects, we can better interpret Thien's attention to the figure of the abusive mother and the way in which it works in her novel as a whole.

This chapter is divided into four sections that examine the effects of Janie's relationship to her losses as she moves from Cambodia to Canada. The first section focuses on Janie's childhood in Cambodia during what Jade Colbert calls “one of the 20th century's unknown genocides” (“Speak, memory”). The Khmer Rouge, a communist regime, disintegrated millions of Cambodian families between 1975 and 1979. It manipulated children into believing its dictate: “Your parents can't protect you, and don't even want to” (“Speak, memory”). This distortion causes Janie to transform the internalized images of her mother figure from “good” objects to “bad” ones. The second section explores Janie's immigration to Canada, where pressures to assimilate complicate Janie's relationship to her already “bad” losses. Janie is compelled to detach from the objects she acquired from her motherland in order to form new attachments in Canada. This conflict incites her combined process of mourning and melancholia. The third section examines the effects of Janie's negotiation through dissociation. She separates her “bad” objects into isolated sections of her psyche, detaching them from herself. As a result, she feels that she has dispatched with them completely. But when she takes a flight through Asia and begins to investigate the case of a friend who has gone missing, the objects return, as if triggered by these experiences. The objects manifest against Janie's will and traumatize her, causing her to

abuse her son. The fourth section analyzes Janie's use of narrativization, a process which, as I explained earlier, prompts migrant mothers to contextualize their traumatic experiences and mourn their losses. Interestingly, Janie narrates others' accounts of loss and invokes her internal objects in these narrativizations. In this way, she is able to confront some of her losses without actually mourning them. Narrativization enables her to engage in both the mourning process of grieving (others') losses and the melancholic preservation of her own "bad" internal objects. Overall, this chapter navigates Janie's melancholic process and its arm's length inclusion of the act of mourning through narrativization, beginning with the internalization of her lost objects.

On Good and Bad Parents: Transforming "Good" Parents Into "Bad" Ones

Klein's theory of the internal world sets the foundation for my reading of Janie's melancholic internalizations. As Klein explains, children build an internal world in which they melancholically internalize their attachment to their parents initially as loved objects. The parents represent "love, goodness, and security" to the children, so they incorporate and preserve them as "good" loved objects within their psyches (Klein 96). Children constantly perform reality testing, in which they observe their parents to find in them proofs of their "good" nature, which they can then compare with their internalized object-versions of them. Comforting experiences affirm their internalizations and strengthen their trust in the objects. Conversely, "[u]npleasant experiences and the lack of enjoyable ones, especially lack of happy and close contact with loved people, increase ambivalence, diminish trust and hope and confirm anxieties about inner annihilation and external persecution [by the internal objects]" (Klein 98). Children who experience unease with their external parents or who lack loving and comforting experiences

with them grow anxious and ambivalent. They consequently transform their once “good” internalized parents into “bad” ones and feel threatened by them. These children grow fearful that the “bad” internal objects will persecute them.¹⁰ In order to diminish their fears and regain trust, they must continue searching for proofs of their “good” external parents. If they do not find this evidence, they remain haunted by their “bad” internal objects. The state of one’s internal objects is, hence, based on the subject’s perception of the actual objects. Thien’s novel explores the way children’s perceptions, and therefore internalizations, of their parents can be influenced by political ideologies in a way that creates anxiety and ambivalence in these children.

Dogs at the Perimeter highlights the ways in which the Khmer Rouge targeted the mother figure in particular in its systematic destruction of the family unit. The regime aimed to strip citizens of all attachments so that they could devote themselves entirely to Angkar, its ruling body. The Khmer Rouge, Boraden Nhem posits, “taught that the Angkar was the only true parent for everyone, and that biological parents meant nothing” (67). It destroyed all personal loyalties, teaching citizens to “survive [by] walking alone, carrying nothing in our hands. Belongings were slid away, then families and loved ones, and then finally our loyalties and ourselves” (Thien 39). In order to isolate the individual and ensure allegiance to the state, the regime took specific aim at the maternal bond. In fact, it depicted the mother as the primary agent of the “disease” of the family. Thien gives voice to the regime’s propaganda as follows: “You belong to no one... and no one belongs to you, not your mother or your child or the woman you would give your life for. Families are a disease of the past” (Thien 199). As this passage indicates, the regime employed a

¹⁰ This fear, Klein writes, is derived from the weaning situation and the Oedipus situation. In invoking either of these scenarios, “the fears of being robbed and punished by both dreaded parents—that is to say, feelings of persecution—have also been revived in deep layers of the mind” (Klein, “Mourning” 104).

rhetoric of illness to condemn mother figures, thus infecting how children perceived and internalized them.

The political defamation of mothers in Thien's novel causes children to internalize their mother figures as "bad" objects. Janie and her friend Bopha view their mothers through the regime's prescribed lenses, taking in this negative perception of them. Janie's mother sacrifices her own needs for the needs of her children. Despite the state-controlled food rations, Janie's mother manages to secure a boiled egg and feeds it to her children, Janie and Sopham. Janie describes it as "the best thing I ever tasted, the salt made my mouth water with pleasure. My mother didn't eat. She took a fragment of shell and traced a line against her wrist, over and over, until the shell disintegrated into her fingers" (Thien 78). By giving up what little food she has for herself, the mother grows ill at an accelerated speed. She disintegrates like the shell in her fingers, and her faculties waste away to the point where, "'She doesn't know us.' She lay between us feverish and laughing" (Thien 84). In this passage, the mother figure embodies the site/sight of sickness. She literally becomes a diseased object and manifests the "illness of the mind" that the Khmer Rouge associates with mothers (Thien 79). In keeping with Klein's theory, the children in Thien's novel who watch their mothers transform into this "bad" object experience unease, discomfort, and anxiety in relation to them. Effectively, they transform their internalizations of their once "good" mothers into "bad" ones. As Klein also points out, those who do not remain with their mothers internalize them as "bad" objects because they lack pleasant and intimate contact with them. Countless children, like Janie's friend Bopha, reinvent themselves as orphans. Their mothers understand that "unless [their] children rid themselves of their history, they would never be safe. One night [Bopha's mother] packed up their things and

sent both her daughters [away]" (Thien 124). As this quotation illustrates, even though survival and protection motivate these mothers, they nevertheless epitomize the sickly object. The children internalize their mothers as “bad,” threatening objects. Mothers—through mere association—threaten their children’s chances of survival. Under the communist regime, children suffer the loss of the loved mother who becomes a “bad” object that jeopardizes her children’s safety. These children need to perform reality testing to recover pleasant and comforting experiences with their external parents, but they do not get a chance to do so.

“Bad” external parents who are absent risk remaining as such indefinitely in their children’s psyche. Janie and Sopham’s father, like their mother, is a dominant member of the family structure and thus poses a threat to the Khmer Rouge. Effectively, the regime devalues all father figures, including Janie’s father, so that he too becomes a “bad” object in her eyes. To reestablish trust in him, Janie must search for proof of his goodness, but when he is abducted by the regime, he becomes absent and remains preserved in Janie’s psyche as a “bad” object. The following passage depicts the abduction of Janie’s father during the evacuation of Phnom Penh.¹¹

My father spoke my name, he pulled me away into a thicket of bodies.

My father disappeared. But still, even now, I imagine seeing him again. In my dreams, he tells me that time ran away from him. Time, only time. One day he blinked his eyes and thirty years had come and gone. (Thien 71)

¹¹ This evacuation, which took place on April 17, 1975, was declared by the Khmer Rouge as the end to “over two thousand years of Cambodian history” (Clayton 1). It is historically referred to as the beginning of “Year Zero” because the regime enforced a complete mourning of the past and positioned this moment as the rebirth of the nation. The communist group imposed an agrarian lifestyle for all citizens, forcing all those living in cities, including Phnom Penh, the nation’s capital, to abandon their homes and relocate to rural communes. During this mass evacuation, men were often separated from the crowds, forced into military vehicles, and never heard from again. It is presumed that many of them were interrogated, imprisoned, and/or executed.

This paragraph opens with the presence of Janie's father and eventually continues with his unexplained disappearance. The negative space, which interrupts the paragraph, materializes Janie's complete loss of her loved object. In suddenly seizing him, the regime obliterates the father's existence. It erases the father and all thirty years of his life, leaving behind no evidence of the "good" father. It is as if such a figure failed to ever exist. Unable to perform reality testing and find proof of her once loved object, Janie has only the "bad" internalization of her father left, which persists indefinitely. Janie feels to have lost all hope for reparation.

According to Klein, when the subject fails in her reparation attempts, she resorts to manic defenses. Unable to reinstate her loved objects, the subject's fears of persecution heighten (Klein, "Mourning" 101). To defend herself against this anticipated persecution, she phantasizes¹² about "triumphing," or dominating and overcoming, the "bad" objects (Klein 101). Klein refers to this desire as a destructive element of the manic position (105). The individual does not actually act on these phantasies because triumph over the object leads to immeasurable guilt. However, as Klein warns, such phantasies or "death wishes" are "actually fulfilled whenever a loved person dies" (105). If the external object dies, then the subject is consumed with guilt for having wished it. The death, "however shattering for other reasons, is to some extent also felt as a victory and gives rise to triumph, and therefore all the more to guilt" (Klein 105). The individual's "triumph" over the "bad" object and guilt for persecuting the lost loved object confines the subject to a manic state. This state is precisely what the Khmer Rouge

¹² Klein uses this spelling of "phantasy" to draw on the word's psychoanalytic etymology. G. Coster, as cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, defines "phantasy" as a "day-dream in which desire, unfulfilled in the world of reality, finds an imaginary fulfillment or satisfaction." One generally uses the alternative spelling, "fantasy," to employ the colloquial use of the word.

imposes on Janie when it coerces her into believing she “triumphs” over her mother. This is also what Janie reacts against later when she sustains her mother as a lost loved object.

The regime, having already configured the mother into a “bad” object, manufactures a traumatic separation to ensure that Janie internalizes the guilt for her mother’s death. Her mother rests in a makeshift infirmary where people “lay covered in flies, too weak to climb out to use the latrine, unable to scavenge and feed themselves” (Thien 117). Janie sits with her mother in her final moments, when she is delirious and starving. She asks Janie for some rice, which Janie cannot provide. Janie helplessly watches her mother’s labored breathing as she struggles “on and on. A nurse came in and told [her,] urgently, that [she] must leave, all the relatives had to go and the doctor had sent word to Angkar” (Thien 120). The urgency in the nurse’s tone raises flags as to why Janie cannot stay with her mother as she passes. The threat of Angkar indicates that this dismissal is not a sympathetic gesture. Rather it serves to incriminate Janie. She has no choice but to leave her starving, dying mother. She “kept walking, kept going. At the junction where Bopha had parted from me, I stood weeping, trying to will myself to return. Go back, I told myself. She needs you. She’ll die without you” (Thien 120-121). In this moment, Janie assumes the guilt for her mother’s death. She failed to nurse her, feed her, and ultimately save her. Instead, she walks out on her mother and lets her die. In abruptly pushing Janie out, the nurses and doctors—agents of Angkar—convince her that she destroyed her lost loved object and fulfilled her phantasy of “triumphing” over it. This “victory” consumes her inner realm and leaves her in despair.

Janie has no time to make reparations for her internal objects in the midst of genocide and exile. Although Janie’s internal realm is a volatile space convoluted with fear and guilt, her

external realm poses a more immediate threat. Millions of people around her are being tortured and executed, while others die from starvation and forced labour in the communes (McLellan 25). Cambodia quickly becomes a site of trauma. It deteriorates into a place “where, by accident, you step into a pile of bones” and witness “[o]ther, more terrible, losses, come up from the mud” (Thien 211, 212). If her mother has become condemned, her motherland, in an analogous fashion, becomes a war-torn site where the regime devastates families in its attempt to reshape the nation. While Cambodia’s political climate is exceptional, the pressure to let go of the past and adopt new ideals is not. Here, Thien draws a parallel between the regime’s attack on the family and the North American condemnation of diasporic history. Both contort the individual’s relationship to her internal objects. Thien extends her critique of enforcing “bad” internalizations of the mother figure by transporting her protagonist to Canada, a country that offers physical refuge, but not unlike Cambodia, also denigrates the mother and motherland for its own ideological purposes.

Janie’s Processes of Immigration and Assimilation as Inciting a Negotiation of Mourning and Melancholia

In her new country, Janie’s diasporic past and ethnicity brand her as a pitiful victim. At twelve years old, Janie is adopted into a foster family. She asks her adoptive mother for “a new name, a new existence” (Thien 24). She wants an identity that is distinct from the labels “of the aid world, [such as] an unaccompanied minor, a separated child” (Thien 24). The language employed by these aid organizations elicits pity. Despite good intentions, the discourse has the effect of victimizing diasporic individuals. It draws on the displaced children’s innocence and

portrays them as helpless and in need of guidance. Unfortunately, this depiction of diasporic individuals as vulnerable is not exclusive to children. It also applies to adults who have been dislocated as well. Later in her life when Janie is an adult, she wanders into a nearly empty church and sits near the back. A woman with white hair approaches her and erroneously claims that “You’ve been drinking... many of your people have this illness. But you’ve come home now. It will be alright” (Thien 27). The woman in this passage presumes that Janie and others like Janie, who are diasporic and racialized, are prone to substance abuse. She implies that they are susceptible to such “illness[es]” and cannot help themselves. In other words, she pathologizes Janie solely on the basis of her race and “gazes at [her] with understanding in her eyes. Sometimes it’s pity, undeserved as it is, that hurts [Janie] the most” (Thien 27). As this passage indicates, Janie does not want or need pity. The unwarranted sympathy is harmful and dangerous. It marks Janie as sick and in need of help. It also propagates the notion that she can be remedied through assimilation.

Janie’s adoptive parents believe they are helping by assimilating her, but what they are in fact doing is denying her melancholic efforts. Her foster mother, an academic, and her foster father, a member of Unicef, are well meaning but misguided in their desire to protect Janie. They do not understand her trauma or her desire to protect her losses. Instead, they shower her with books, television shows, “anything that might improve [her] English” (Thien 21). They believe that it is in Janie’s best interest to assimilate. Hence, they try to acculturate her by replacing the objects of her motherland with new ones. Similar to the woman with white hair who believes Janie needs to be cured of her people’s illness, her surrogate parents think they are giving Janie what she needs by enforcing whiteness. Conversely, Janie “wanted to tell [her foster mother] that

there were too many [people inside her], that I needed to guard the world that held us all together. I was afraid that I would drop it, shatter it, let it break apart” (Thien 24). Here, Janie expresses a yearning to melancholically sustain her lost objects. She wants to hold her internal world together. It is fragile and requires all of her psychic efforts. Janie’s Canadian parents demonstrate the ways in which assimilation diminishes diasporic experiences and internalized objects, and Janie’s rejection of their efforts in this regard highlights the political productivity of melancholia.

The process of assimilation compounds Janie’s relationship to her preserved objects. Janie is coerced into letting go of her internal objects because they represent her life before immigration. They become setbacks that keep her from achieving full assimilation. Melancholic attachments to her mother and motherland signify an inability to attach to new objects. Janie must mourn them in order to move on from her diasporic past and assimilate to dominant culture. Janie is conflicted with the pressures to mourn her “bad” losses and her desire to melancholically preserve her lost loved objects. This conflict to either let go or hold on, according to Eng and Han, “underwrites the losses of the immigrant experience” (353).

Janie responds to this conflict by entering into a state in which she engages in both mourning and melancholia. Pressures to assimilate threaten Janie’s internal objects. However, in spite of this pressure and the conflict that it incites, Janie resiliently sustains her objects. She enacts and expresses her racial melancholia as a combination of both mourning and melancholia. As Eng and Han contend, the racial melancholia that ensues from assimilation is a negotiation between the two processes:

The ethnic subject does not have to inhabit one or the other—mourning *or* melancholia—but mourning *and* melancholia coexist at once in the process of assimilation. This continuum between mourning and melancholia allows us to understand the negotiation of racial melancholia as *conflict* rather than *damage*. (Eng and Han 363)

The passage above indicates that, for Eng and Han, the two states, while contradictory, are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to simultaneously mourn and melancholically preserve loss. In such instances, the subject can participate in mourning while also sustaining her losses by distancing herself from them. For Janie, this distance critically allows her to grieve her traumatic experiences and move on to assimilation without ever forfeiting the objects of her past. This dual process illustrates that Janie is not pathologically incapable of mourning; conversely, she can take part in mourning in a way that accommodates her needs, thereby highlighting the potential for political resistance. Through engaging in both mourning and melancholia, then, Janie can meet the demands of assimilation while discreetly preserving her internal objects. One way that she situates herself on the melancholic end of this continuum is through dissociation.

Dissociation as Mourning and Melancholia

Janie dissociates herself from her internal objects. Dissociation is the psychic process in which the subject splits herself from her unwanted objects (Eng and Han 361).¹³ When the ego feels conflicted by its internalized objects it relegates the objects to isolated parts of the psyche

¹³ While there are numerous slightly varying definitions of “dissociation,” the one that I draw from is Freud’s “splitting of the consciousness.” Harold Blum contends that Janet likely first identified and described “dissociation” and refers to Freud’s notion of splitting as “an almost identical phenomenon” (427). Psychoanalytic scholars generally liken the two processes as parallel or even as encompassing one another. As defined in the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, “Splitting is a form of dissociation that results as a conflict that can affect the ego... [and] forms the basis of the capacity in the psychic apparatus for dividing itself into systems” (1645, emphasis mine). Like Eng and Han who refer to dissociation as the process of splitting an ethnic object from the subject, I draw on their adoption of Freud’s notion of splitting as a form of dissociation.

and splits this part off from the rest of itself. The subject feels, in splitting the psyche, that she has rid herself of the unwanted objects. Though divided, the objects certainly remain a part of the psyche. This dissociative process is evident in Janie's treatment of her melancholic image of her mother and father in Cambodia. She pushes the image "down, clothing it in darkness. Turning away so completely from it, it disappears" (Thien 121). Janie melancholically buries the image of her parents, isolating it to a part of her psyche that she can walk away from. This act of dissociation allows Janie to believe that she has detached from the objects and can therefore strive for assimilation. The fact remains, however, that the image and the objects themselves still exist whether or not she consciously chooses to see them. Because dissociation is a temporary denial of the objects, it does not completely remove them from the psyche. It allows the subject to continue melancholically preserving the objects while believing she has severed them. Through dissociation, Janie feels to have let go of her objects while she continues to melancholically sustain them.

The problem with the dissociative process is that if the buried or banished objects are triggered, they can return against the subject's will and inflict pain—in this case, on Janie. In the novel, the objects remain preserved in Janie's psyche, dangling outside of her conscious will. If prompted they may traumatically manifest in Janie's conscious realm despite her attempts to segregate them. As Bessel van der Holk and Onno van der Hart explain, when "one element of the traumatic experience is evoked, all other elements follow automatically" (163). In other words, triggering one element of loss causes the object along with all of its traumatic associations to manifest. Such manifestations are particularly painful for Janie, who, after decades of dissociating from her internal objects, has the memory of her motherland triggered.

On a flight through Asia, she catches a glimpse of Cambodia and it “opened up a wound in [her]” (Thien 17). This image triggers the return of her internalized home. It re-introduces the object along with its horrifying associations back into her consciousness. Furthermore, the investigation of her missing friend Hiroji forces her to directly confront her internal objects. Janie suspects that Hiroji travelled to Cambodia to find his brother. He leaves behind in his apartment “translations of Khmer documents, correspondence with various government officials, maps” (Thien 51). Janie peruses these documents in the hopes of locating him, but they force Janie to recall the regime’s genocidal practices. The files widen Janie’s wound and bring back the unwanted memories of her internalized mother objects.

In this case it is not just the “bad”-mother-object, but the bad internal motherland that invades Janie’s consciousness, opening up a traumatic psychic landscape. In a scene partway through the novel, Janie is unnerved by the sight of water spilled on her kitchen floor. The water evokes traumatizing memories of her devastated country. After witnessing the indiscernible dying and dead “lying in streams of water [with] their mouths open” in Cambodia, water becomes for Janie a symbol of what was once a “blessing turned into a torture” (Thien 90, 109). The spill prompts the dissociated objects and their traumatic associations to follow automatically. The water, like the internalized motherland,

came to me, everywhere, loud... Kiri was walking through it, running, stamping his feet. I asked him to stop. My thoughts didn’t fit together. I heard noises all around us, I saw shapes coming nearer and Kiri shouting, oblivious. *Stop*, I said again. I tried to free myself. In a moment of wildness, he grabbed a handful of forks and threw them down into the mess. (Thien 152)

The spilt water in this passage triggers the manifestation of her internalized object. Cambodia returns to Janie suddenly as enclosing shapes and escalating sounds. It physically surrounds her. This externalization controverts the unconscious work of melancholia. The object physically imposes itself on Janie here. It invades her consciousness and distresses her so that her thoughts no longer “fit together.” Janie tries to escape and “free [her]self,” but this collision of her psychic past and physical present arrests her and ensnares her son. Kiri tramples through this horrifying scene, shouting and throwing sharp objects into the water. Much to Janie’s dismay, he becomes entangled in her internal world. The internal objects manifest in this passage and impair Janie’s ability to protect herself and her loved ones.

One of the most interesting, and distressing, effects of the return of the dissociated objects is the violent alteration of Janie’s ability to mother. As we have seen, by this point in the novel Janie has for decades dissociated from her internal objects; she effectively forfeits control over them. While on the one hand this dissociation can be taken as a sign of her successful melancholia (as a sign that she has repressed these objects) at the same time it means that she cannot ensure that they remain repressed in her unconscious. When triggered, the objects oscillate between her unconscious and conscious realms and possess her. As Y-Dang Troeung warns in her discussion of this novel, the “effects can be fatal if trauma is triggered in the wrong environment” (93). Thien illustrates the threatening position in which Janie places her son when her traumatic objects are triggered in his presence.

The noise seemed like the ceiling crashing down, falling on top of us, blocking all the light. I raised my hand and hit him, once, twice, I cannot remember it all. And then, in an instant, the noise disappeared.

He was sitting on the floor, gasping, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

I knelt beside him, in shock, when I looked into his face, the bruise terrified me, I saw my child curled up, I smelled a burning in the room. He saw me watching him.

“Don’t be scared,” Kiri said. “I’m going to fix everything. You don’t have to be scared of me.” (Thien 152)

Her objects return to her once more as an invasive noise. The impact is overpowering. The internalized objects do not simply collide with Janie’s physical realm as before but completely collapse her conscious ceiling. They possess her entirely, dispossessing her of control over her psychic and physical faculties. Janie blindly hits Kiri multiple times until the objects finally recede into her unconscious, the noise goes away, and her vision returns. Janie’s ability to look, see, and watch is repeated several times *after* the abuse takes place and contrasts her lack of vision and consciousness during the abuse. Her shock and terror demonstrate her disbelief of her own actions. Janie’s abuse does not stem from an inherently “bad” character or “bad” intentions. Her abusive actions are a result of her subjection to the pressures of assimilation. She condemns and dissociates from her internal objects to meet these pressures. In treating her internal objects this way, Janie manages to partially sustain them but she also relinquishes all control over them. The “bad” objects return autonomously and possess her. This possession is evident in the uncontrollable abuse of her son in this passage. Dissociation clearly threatens her psychic health as well as the safety of her loved ones. Janie moves out of the family’s home and into her missing friend Hiroji’s apartment, the very place where she found the Khmer documents while investigating his disappearance, the discovery that triggered the return of her internal objects.

There she searches for a new mode of responding to her losses in a way that involves enacting practices of both mourning and melancholia.

Narrativization as Mourning and Melancholia

Janie adopts narrativization as a productive negotiation of mourning that allows her to remain in her melancholic state. Migrant mothers who have experienced trauma during immigration or settlement, Edmonds argues, can narrate their “trauma story” to grieve their experiences and losses of diaspora (50). Narrating accounts of loss allows mothers to confront their painful experiences of trauma which otherwise might impede their conscious realms, as they do in Janie’s case. Mothers create narratives by contextualizing memories which otherwise “have no development, do not progress in time and sequence, and fail to reveal the [individual’s] interpretation of traumatic events” (Mollica qtd. in Edmonds 51). Without the process of narrativization, these memories re-appear as isolated and traumatic fragments, much like the manifestations of Janie’s dissociated losses. Janie adopts narrativization to prevent her dissociated objects from invading her physical realm and endangering her family—but with one key difference: she does not narrate her own experiences of loss. She narrates those of others and inserts her own internal objects into her narrativizations. Janie’s employment of narrativization is shrewd because the process itself is one that is associated with mourning, but by invoking her lost objects in narratives of others’ losses, she actually preserves her objects. Her narrativizations are carefully constructed to enable her mourning process while critically detaching from her losses so that she can effectively continue to preserve them.

Janie's narrativization process includes organizing, sequentializing and reimagining experiences of loss. She organizes memories of loss into clearly framed sequences, introducing them with "[fragment]" and closing them with "[end]." Janie establishes boundaries with these narrative framing devices, delimiting the past psychic realm from invading her present physical realm. Within these parameters she also carefully notes the dates of the events. The assignment of time denotes an effort to establish chronology and logical progression. This progressive structure has the effect of de-fragmenting memories and allows Janie to move forward in time as opposed to being entrapped in the past. Janie uses a combination of these devices to adapt different characters' stories. These stories include Hiroji's disappearance (1), Elie's degenerating mind (10), Nuong's exile (157), James's imprisonment (175), and Hiroji's journey to her motherland (219), some of which I will later return to. Each of these narratives directly correlates with Janie's own diasporic experiences and as such she interprets them according to her own experiences. Janie's uptake of narrativization can be described as what Troeung calls "an imaginative and reconstructive relationship to the past" (95). It enables Janie to revisit sites of loss and imagine alternative circumstances for her internal objects.

Janie narrates the life and loss of another's parent to reimagine her relationship with her own family. A couple of pages into her narrativization marked "Monday, February 27 / [fragment]" Janie chronicles the life of Hiroji and that of his brother James's father. In a paragraph that spans two pages, Janie narrates the father's legacy: his contribution to the faculty of medicine at Tokyo University, his efforts to get the family out of Japan after WWII, and his relocation of the family to America, England, and finally Canada, where "a year after they reached Vancouver, [he] died, post-stroke, on a crisp white bed in a Canadian hospital" (Thien

182). This backstory depicts the father figure as a fully fleshed individual rather than as a static “bad” object that Janie was taught to internalize. It honours the father’s life and juxtaposes the obliteration of Janie’s father’s existence. Moreover, this context-providing narrative emphasizes the family’s survival. James, Hiroji, and their parents made it safely out of their war-stricken motherland and immigrated to different countries. This narrativization allows Janie to imagine surviving her own family members and carrying them with her to Canada. In a melancholic sense, Janie does just this by preserving them internally and sustaining them psychically in her stories. She continues invoking them in narratives of loss to imagine more accommodating circumstances. For instance, rather than accepting the gross hospitalization of her mother, who laid on straw mats “on the floor, with nothing to cover [her] or keep the rats away,” and died alone, Janie re-envisions her as lying in a “crisp white bed in a Canadian hospital” surrounded by family members (Thien 117). Instead of accepting the disorienting disappearance of her father and the negative space he leaves behind, Janie narrates a final exchange between James and his father, “Be brave, his father told [him]” (Thien 182). These words, which were lacking in Janie’s experiences of loss, compensate for the goodbyes of which she was robbed. This narrativization demonstrates Janie’s sustained and fluid relationship to her internal objects.

The process of narrativization challenges Janie’s perception of her internal objects as “bad.” In Janie’s narrativization of the family gathered in the hospital, James watches his mother with ambivalence. He perceives his mother to be a secure object for his infant brother, Hiroji, to sleep on “in ignorant bliss” (Thien 182). Although this image denotes happiness, the “ignorance” of his infant brother emphasizes a discrepancy in Hiroji’s and James’s perception of her. Hiroji’s ignorance contrasts with James’s “improbably wise” nature which exposes him to a different,

arguably more accurate understanding of their mother (Thien 183). Janie depicts James as the mature child who grows out of his maternal idealization and begins to see the external mother's "many surfaces [and] learn[s] to see between the blinds, behind the clean edges" beyond her "passive and kind" face (Thien 188-189). She is, in James's view, not a perfect figure but one who offers comfort and security nonetheless. This exposure is an important step for Janie. It opens her up to different facets of the mother figure. As well, this passage demonstrates what literary scholars have speculated: that narrating memories "of the collective past inevitably affects both the identity of the individual person and his or her previously accepted world view" (Landsberg qtd. in Ty 56).¹⁴ James's point of view challenges Janie's internalization of her mother. It pushes her to view the mother as an "imperfect," or non-idealized, figure who is at the same time non-threatening. Janie's internalization of her mother as a "bad" object diminished her to a fixed, persecutory figure, but this narrativization makes a case for a more fluid understanding of the mother object. This new understanding encourages Janie to address her manic guilt over "triumphing" over the internal mother.

In her mind, Janie remains culpable for her mother's death, so she narrates a phantasy in which James can face a comparable form of guilt. In this phantasy, James's family is back in the hospital with his sick father and "nobody really looks at him, not even his parents. James tells himself it's not possible to disappoint the dead" (Thien 186-187). The lack of contact between the father and the focalizer of Janie's story contradicts the dialogue we saw earlier in which he

¹⁴ Ty discusses in "Little Daily Miracles" the literary technique of telling a single story through different characters with unique points of view in order "to demonstrate continuity and connections rather than fragmentation" and highlight what she calls the "globality" or economic, political, cultural, and environmental similarities which bind individuals despite national boundaries (46). For Ty, the combination of multiple characters' stories brings the characters together and "support[s] a sense of collective social responsibility" (56). The quotation that I cited from this article is particularly useful to my research because it demonstrates that by borrowing others' stories, the protagonist can edit her own history. This chapter is interested in Janie's use of others' stories to tend to her personal grief. It focuses on the introspective effects of storytelling, rather than its possibility for interconnectedness.

reminds his son to display courage. It is actually more consistent with Janie's lack of communication with her own parents. This suggests that this phantasy caters to Janie's needs rather than to those of James. The subject tells himself, "it's not possible to disappoint the dead." One might interpret this message to mean that one cannot shame the dead or hurt the lost. Janie, who needs forgiveness for "triumphing" over her lost loved mother, can accept this message as an absolution of guilt. By attaching this statement to a character in a narration rather than to herself directly, Janie imagines an objective figure granting her forgiveness. It allows Janie to continue sustaining her internal objects without the manic guilt of having destroyed them. These narrativizations increase Janie's confidence in her process of mourning and melancholia.

Janie's internal objects continue to evolve as she projects them into her narrativizations. In a [fragment] marked "Monday, March 6," Janie narrates Hiroji's memory of finding his brother in Cambodia. As the brothers discuss the passing of their mother, Hiroji phantasizes about her return. Janie projects her internal objects into this narrativization and confronts them through Hiroji.

The stars glistened. On the road outside, Hiroji thought he saw his mother. She was walking through the village. She had come to fetch her coat, and now she wrapped it tight around herself. She told him not to follow her. He felt lost, immaterial. He wanted to shelter the things he loved, to keep them from washing away. (Thien 250)

In this narrativization, Janie incites her motherland but is able to picture it differently than how she internalized it because she is envisioning it through Hiroji's point of view. Moreover, through narrating his experience, Janie is able to move beyond her fragmented, frozen memories and imagine a progression in time. Cambodia is not the traumatizing site of loss she originally

internalized. Cambodia is now a glistening country rebuilding itself from within. It is a safe space in which to invoke the internal mother. As opposed to the previous manifestations, this return of the mother object is unobtrusive; it is methodical. The mother appears slowly and acts in a structured, step-by-step manner that is representative of Janie's narrativization process. Janie expresses a fierce desire through Hiroji in this passage to hold onto her objects, "to shelter the things [s]he loved, to keep them from washing away." Janie maintains a tight grasp on her loved objects out of the fear of losing them. The mother object, however, reassures Janie. She advises Janie not to follow her, encouraging her to let her go. This release she recommends looks a lot like mourning, but it is in fact not mourning. Janie can allow her objects to leave the story because they always return. The objects persist in her narrativizations. Janie can invoke them and then let them go; they are still a part of her psyche. The objects continue to return to her narrativization because she has only engaged in the mourning work of narrating second-hand, and has not directly worked through her own melancholically preserved losses.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have examined Janie's melancholic process from internalization to preservation. I demonstrated the ways in which the Khmer Rouge and Western ideals of assimilation condemn attachments to the maternal. I have also explored Janie's adoption of dissociation and narrativization to address the conflict experienced by diasporic individuals to either mourn their losses or melancholically preserve them. As Janie's case shows, dissociation requires the subject to segregate the objects from the rest of her psyche and isolate them so completely that she no longer maintains control over them. Essentially, Janie's splitting of the

objects from the rest of her psyche proves detrimental to her melancholic process. She takes on narrativization, a process that separates her from her losses like dissociation does, but one that becomes more productive as it allows her to mourn her objects, albeit filtered through other characters' accounts. In short, Janie appears to mourn her internal objects while actually sustaining them in her narrativizations. Janie's negotiation of mourning and melancholia allows her to preserve her lost loved objects despite the pathologization of her melancholic attachments.

As I close this chapter, I return to my primary inquiry. What does it mean for an abusive mother to be represented in a text that examines diaspora and constructions of race? This chapter attempted to investigate this question by exploring how Janie's internalization of her mother as a "bad" object affects her internal world and experiences of immigration and assimilation. It argued that Janie's subjection to the effects of diaspora and expectations to assimilate inform Janie's internal world and culminate in the abusive treatment of her son. It is easy and perhaps even instinctive to write Janie off as a "bad" mother, but by reading for her abusiveness through Klein's theory of internalization and Eng and Han's notion of racial melancholia, this chapter argues that Thien's novelistic representation of Janie's responses to loss complicate our understanding of the work of melancholia and mourning among diasporic individuals.

Conclusion:

Where We Do We Go From Loss?

This project sought to demonstrate the unique ways in which melancholic mothering enables individuals—in particular Asian Canadian characters depicted in recent Canadian novels—to respond to their experiences of diaspora and assimilation. It examined representations of motherhood as they are presented in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and Madeleine Thien's *Dogs at the Perimeter*; with a specific focus on melancholic practices of mothering as a critical response to assimilation. Pressures to assimilate compel diasporic mothers to disidentify with their ethnic cultures and histories, and also to detach from the losses incurred during dislocation and immigration, while idealizations of motherhood coerce the mothers into denying their own needs. These ideologies replace the mothers' values with North American ones and force them to forget their own childhood experiences, experiences that are often traumatic. This thesis argues that melancholic motherwork responds to these challenges in the following ways: (1) it identifies and counters ideologies, in particular nationalist-based ones, which racialize Asian Canadians and subordinate mothers of colour, (2) it sustains personal, familial, and cultural losses, and (3) it tends to the physical and psychological effects of diaspora. In addition to developing these three strands of my argument, in the course of working on this thesis I have come across some findings which are contrary to my original contention, particularly with respect to the role of mourning in this process. As productive as melancholia proves to be in most cases, in some cases it must be combined with mourning in order to be effective as a mode of resistance. In the case of Thien's

novel, deeply traumatic experiences and the losses that ensue from them require a melancholic treatment that encompasses the process of mourning to avoid further distressing the subject. My application of Eng and Han's theory of this role of mourning within racial melancholia to Thien's novel highlights the value of literary manifestations of this phenomenon, at least insofar as I point out that narrativization-as-mourning is an expression of grief in a literary form. Moreover, the fact that I discuss a very particular kind of narrativization (i.e. from a third-person perspective) shows how the varieties of literary forms provide the opportunity for a nuanced kind of mourning that does not give up all of its melancholic restraint.

Another aspect of this project stems from my continued awareness of the fact that my argument—that racial melancholia has the potential to resist assimilation—also runs the risk of depoliticizing grief. In the process of melancholia, the subject internalizes loss to protect it from external harm. This internalization privatizes loss. At the same time, this internalization risks privatizing melancholia, so that the subject's grief appears to be the result of private issues or personal problems, as opposed to dominant ideals or institutionalized racism. The privatization of loss, while it resistively sustains loss, also risks depoliticizing it. In addition, I have had little opportunity to explore my ambivalence towards this project, an ambivalence that leads me to consider the limitations, in addition to the potential, of racial melancholia. For the remainder of this conclusion I summarize my findings of my analysis of melancholic motherwork as it is depicted in the three novels I have examined, and I also identify the work that I think remains to be done on this topic.

As this thesis has argued, dominant Canadian culture (in its social as well as political forms) enforces the erasure of Asian Canadians' ethnic culture, histories, and identities, and at

the same time it denies this erasure by perpetuating discourses of multiculturalism and inclusiveness. There is an insistence that any grief that arises from racial minority groups results from personal pathology and cultural differences. Asian [North] Americans' mental health issues, Eng and Han write,

are often diagnosed as being exclusively symptomatic of *cultural* (not political) conflicts. That is, by configuring Asian cultural difference as the source of all intergenerational disease, Asian culture comes to serve as an alibi or a scapegoat for a panoply of mental health issues... [when actually] these issues may, in fact, trace their etiology not to questions of Asian cultural difference but rather to forms of institutionalized racism. (355)

In other words, by positioning the conflicts of Asian Canadians in terms of cultural differences, dominant institutions deflect attention away from the fact that they racialize visible minorities and enforce assimilation. Their insistence that Asian Canadians' problems are a result of disparities between Asian cultures and North American cultures insinuates that if only Asian Canadians were more like (white) Canadians, then they would not be conflicted. Relatively recent violent historical events, like internment, are disregarded in such assertions. The novels studied in this thesis illustrate the ways in which this displacement of blame continues to pathologize Asian Canadians. They also show that the presence of racial melancholia challenges these misconceptions. Despite Freud's claim in "Mourning and Melancholia" that melancholia indicates a pathological disposition in the subject, racial melancholia, as Eng and Han position it, identifies and also challenges a socio-political problem. They take melancholia, which is situated in "terms of individual loss and suffering," and re-situate it in terms of "group

identifications” (Eng and Han 344). This reconfiguration of racial melancholia as a collective and communal condition underscores Asian Canadians’ everyday struggles and illustrates that the condition is neither personal nor pathological. *The Electrical Field*, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and *Dogs at the Perimeter* portray Asian Canadian subjects as conflicted by social pressures and political ideals. Altogether, the novels demonstrate that Asian Canadians collectively face the diminishment and threat of their ethnic cultures, histories, and identities. As Eng and Han maintain, “we do not imagine that this threat is a result of some ontological tendency on the part of the melancholic; it is a social threat” (365). This social threat, which afflicts an entire ethnic community, highlights the fact that loss is incited at a systematic level. Racial melancholia confirms that national and political institutions which dislocate communities, racialize minority subjects, and threaten to erase their diasporic histories, contribute to Asian Canadians’ settlement struggles. These social structures prompt their melancholic grief.

In addition to identifying the basis of grief, racial melancholia effectively functions as a response to loss. The mother characters examined in this project incur the losses of liberty, subjectivity, and loved ones to the traumatic experiences of internment, imperialism, and genocide. They also incur familial losses of history, ancestry, and heritage to dislocation, immigration, and assimilation. In mimicking whiteness and performing white mothering, the mother figures additionally lose their ethnic language and cultural traditions specifically as they pertain to mothering. Through melancholia, however, the characters sustain their lost loved objects. They form a psychic attachment to these objects by internalizing them. The objects remain safely preserved within the psyche, protected against external threats. This incorporation

productively enables the subjects to physically appear as if they have mourned and therefore let go of their objects, while they are actually sustaining them.

The ability to subvert dominant ideologies while appearing to comply with them demonstrates the productive potential of racial melancholia. The melancholic subject looks as if she is assimilating to white Canadian monoculture and performing white experiences of motherhood. By giving this impression, she evades condemnation by institutions that enforce assimilation and police her. The appearance of having let go of her past also enables her to consciously form new attachments. She can adopt North American ideals, languages, and customs—which provide access to national and cultural privileges—without sacrificing her ethnic ideals, languages, and customs that are safely preserved within her psyche. Through racial melancholia, the subject subverts the expectations to forfeit the objects of her culture and history. This subversion shrewdly enables the melancholic to circumvent the process of assimilation by forming new attachments without letting go of her old ones. Racial melancholia is a mode of inconspicuously sustaining the losses of diaspora.

Melancholia also serves to sustain the subject's well-being and psychic health. Contrary to expectations of self-sacrifice, melancholic motherhood dwells on and prioritizes the mothers' psychic health. Chapter one discussed the ways in which Asako tempers her internalized racism through nurturing her remaining family members, and also tends to her stunted sexuality through mothering her neighbour Sachi. Chapter two examined Naoe's expressions of anger as a way of reasserting her subjectivity. It also looked at Keiko's state of depression through which she communicates her grief. Chapter three discussed Janie's narrativization process as a means of addressing her traumatic internalizations. Melancholia's emphasis on the internal events of the

mothers' psyche demonstrates its concern for maternal mental health. I have argued that this inward turn is a form of self-care that effectively enables the mothers to manage their grief, rather than simply deny it, as assimilationist and dominant mothering ideologies require. This self-care is not only necessary for the mothers' well-being, but also productive for those around them. In prioritizing their psychic needs, the mothers are better able to resist assimilation and equip others to do the same.

Motherwork that is rooted in melancholia has the potential to sustain and reproduce losses of culture, history, and heritage. As demonstrated in the first two chapters, mothers who melancholically sustain losses may also pass them on. In her position as an othermother, Asako unconsciously relays internment memories and Japanese language to her surrogate daughter. Sachi eagerly receives these objects and uses them to establish a positive ethnic identity for herself. Chapter two highlights how all three mother figures unconsciously transfer their preserved losses through speech, customs, and food. This reproduction of melancholia effectively ensures that the losses do not diminish within the ego or the subject, and that melancholia is sustained across generations. The mother characters' investments in one another's grief help them to individually and collectively resist assimilation. The productive results of melancholic mothering as depicted by Sakamoto's and Goto's novels highlight the fact that the work of melancholia is complemented and extended by the work of mothering. Melancholia is at its most productive when it is experienced collectively and shared matrilineally.

The results of my analysis have been largely consistent with my original hypothesis that melancholic motherwork is a productive response to diaspora and loss. As I indicated above, however, it has also given rise to some complex problems that require further consideration. First

of all, counter to Freud's opposition of the process of melancholia, I have discovered, in part through Eng and Han, at least one occasion when melancholia must also be balanced with mourning. When loss is incurred during extremely traumatizing circumstances, it can remain associated with this distress. As I showed in chapter three, Janie incurs the losses of her mother figures and motherland to the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge. Combined with the processes of immigration and assimilation, this trauma transforms her once loved objects into devastating ones. Upon resurfacing, the "bad" objects re-traumatize Janie and cause her to abuse her son. Evidently Janie needs a way of engaging in melancholia that limits her unconscious outbursts of abusive behaviour. Janie's case exemplifies Y-Dang Troeung's assertion that the "politics of loss should not function as an either/or prescription to remember or forget, but rather as a mode of interrogation that seeks to maintain a careful, ethical balance between" (93). For Janie, this balance between remembering and forgetting requires a particular form of mourning that allows her to grieve her traumatic experiences without giving up her losses. I argued that this character is able to limit her violent eruptions through a modified process of narrativization. In this process, Janie consciously forgets and unconsciously recalls her losses through telling others' stories. By relaying the experiences of others, rather than her own, Janie keeps her losses safely preserved within her psyche. This altered mode of narrativization allows the mother figure to keep her objects at bay—within her psyche and with fewer outbursts. Melancholia is a productive form of resistance that sustains the objects that are threatened by national and political ideologies, but it may also require the conjunctive work of a nuanced form of mourning. Apart from the argument I made in the chapter on Thien's novel, examining the "bad"

internalization of loss portrayed in *Dogs at the Perimeter* also lead me to consider the limitations of melancholia.

Racial melancholia is productive because it internalizes loss, but this internalization may conversely limit the condition's political potential. In melancholia, the subject introjects her losses, preserving them internally. This internalization is a powerful form of political expression. It makes invisible what the external threatens to eliminate. In addition, the fact that this politicization is harboured inside means that it goes undetected, which makes it difficult to be co-opted by dominant culture. In this respect, the domestic sphere in which mothering often takes place proves to be a powerful and effective location for this political work. At the same time, the subject also risks relegating the sources of her losses to the private sphere. The sources—diasporic experiences, pressures to assimilate, mothering ideologies, for example—may be internalized and concealed within the psyche along with the losses. As Eng and Han explain, “this turning from outside to inside threatens to erase the *political* bases of melancholia” (355). The internal nature of the melancholic process risks depoliticizing its roots. If the sources of loss are concealed, then few people can engage with them and assess their causes. Meanwhile the subject often risks assuming responsibility for her grief. This self-incrimination perpetuates misconceptions that melancholia is a pathological condition or that the discontent Asian Canadians feel is a result of cultural differences, rather than national and political ideologies. This thesis examined this risk specifically in its discussion of Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, whereby Asako internalizes the loss of her older brother, Eiji, as well as the blame for his death. She problematically insists that she “did not hold them accountable. For these were private matters; family matters” (Sakamoto 110). In internalizing her brother, as well as the camps'

racism, Asako privatizes the cause of his death; she holds herself personally accountable for the loss of her brother. This privatization erases the political circumstances surrounding his death. She dismisses the Japanese Canadian internment, its unsafe conditions, and its dehumanizing treatment, effectively reducing these political issues to “private matters.” Sakamoto’s case depicts the risk that melancholia runs to undo its own productive potential. Because the melancholic process internalizes the external, it threatens to also privatize the political. This privatization has the dangerous effect of re-inscribing personal pathology and misattributing blame to cultural difference even though the private act of internalization is precisely what makes this political expression so powerful.

This project was particularly difficult for me because it is so personal. It reflects the fact that in Canada the pressures for immigrants and their descendants to assimilate continue, and it highlights the many ways in which these pressures generate loss and incite conflicts. The representations of melancholic mothering in Sakamoto’s, Goto’s, and Thien’s novels highlight characters that are encumbered by loss. Their losses are a result of the systematic marginalization of Asian Canadians by institutions that deny their diasporic experiences, undermine their motherwork, and identify them as racial others. These representations motivated me to question my mother’s and my grandmothers’ experiences as newcomers who raised children in a country that is not their motherland. The project also compelled me to question whether my own desire for personal and professional achievement might be considered a form of mimicry, or some kind of desire for a norm that has been defined by a dominant culture that has privileged whiteness and continues to treat “white experiences” as the norm. On the other hand, though, there is a way in which critical race theory can make one question one’s legitimate longing to be a part of the

cultural fabric. I am still struggling to work through my personal conflicts, and critical race theory has yet to provide a language nuanced enough for me to effectively articulate this negotiation. I do hope—like many of the other scholars and authors studied in this project—that the field of Asian Canadian studies can eventually move forward and away from discourses of dislocation and racialization, though I feel that this is a difficult transition to make so long as pressures to assimilate perpetuate. That being said, there are opportunities for Asian Canadian literature to explore characters who are not burdened by loss or who have different responses to assimilation. Novels that focus more on second and third generation immigrants might insightfully convey alternative or contradictory understandings of immigration, assimilation, and racialization. Comparisons between those novels and the ones presented here can meaningfully contribute to this project's discussion of the effects of melancholic mothering on subsequent generations.

Though this thesis pushed me academically and introspectively, perhaps the most challenging aspect of it is the unease I feel towards its emphasis on diaspora, trauma, and loss. The representations of melancholic mothering in *The Electrical Field*, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and *Dogs at the Perimeter* stress the ways in which diaspora incites traumatic losses, losses that dominant systems seek to quickly diminish by marginalizing Asian Canadians and their experiences. These works attest to Lily Cho's contention in "Asian Canadian Futures," that "Asian Canadian literature must retain its affiliation with diasporic concerns and remain open to its ties to postcolonial studies because a rigorous exploration of the politics and culture of indenture and its aftermath needs to be at the centre of Asian Canadian literary studies specifically" (183). Cho argues that Asian Canadian texts should continue to depict issues of

diaspora and settlement as a means of politicizing them. These issues occupy much of Asian Canadian literature, including all of the novels studied in this project. Stories of dislocation and relocation are fundamental to Asian Canadian texts, though, as Eleanor Ty points out,

[e]ven though stories about marginalization, exclusion, and problems of identity are extremely important and integral to the development of Asian Americans and Asian Canadians as a group, [... we] need to break away from these positions, because the articulation of abjection and victimization, while a necessary form of identity formation and resistance, can also act as a form of containment, prescriptive representation, and misidentity. (*Unfastened* 124-125)

Ty contemplates that on the one hand, it is important to understand the ways in which Asian Canadians have been excluded politically and marginalized culturally. Conflicts of diaspora, assimilation, and racialization are unfortunately lived realities for Asian Canadians and as such Asian Canadian scholarship should reflect this. On the other hand, it is beneficial to move beyond these narratives of subjection to avoid confining Asian Canadians to a perpetually injured state. Reading Asian Canadian narratives that highlight diasporic concerns in conjunction with texts that transcend these issues helps to evade containment, prescription, and misidentification.

Racial melancholia is a valuable framework with which to discuss Asian Canadians and their diasporic struggles because it rejects the notion that Asian North Americans' conflicts are personal problems. Instead, it takes care to position their issues as social political issues. This reconfigured discourse focuses on the ongoing struggles of Asian Canadians in a way that does not victimize them. Eng and Han's racial melancholia serves, then, as an effective way of discussing Asian Canadians' social and political challenges. While it is an extremely valuable

tool, I am wary of over-emphasizing its potential. Racial melancholia is a productive response to ideologies that enforce loss, but it is not a solution. Melancholia is limited by the fact that it is a reaction to a symptom of a larger problem—the problem that Asian Canadians are still subject to the erasure of their diasporic histories, ethnic identities, and cultural values. They remain situated in a framework that idealizes whiteness. Within this framework, Asian Canadians can assert limited subjectivity by melancholically sustaining loss, and Asian Canadian mothers can assert greater subjectivity through reproducing loss. This psychic resistance of dominant ideologies is productive but limited. Racial melancholia is not a form of subjective power or full agency. Subject to racialization, Asian Canadians employ racial melancholia as a form of limited agency.

This project aimed to explore the political potential for melancholic mothering to respond to the losses of diaspora and resist systems that enforce assimilation. Melancholic motherwork identifies and subverts dominant ideologies regarding race, immigration, and “good” mothering. It also sustains the objects that are threatened by assimilationist social pressures and policies within Canada, and supports mothers’ need to tend to themselves as well as their children. Mothering that is rooted in melancholia prioritizes the mothers’ psychic health and addresses their psychological and physical responses to diaspora. It is an effective critique of ideologies that racialize people of colour and seek to erase the traumatic experiences of diaspora as well as traumatic racist events and attitudes targeting diasporic subjects within Canada. If racial melancholia remains a collective condition, persisting within communities and across generations, it has the capacity to politicize Asian Canadians’ experiences of settlement. If, on the other hand, racial melancholia does not remain as a communal investment or is relegated to the private, personal sphere, it risks depoliticizing loss and ignoring the institutions that incite it.

I contend that the work of mothering keeps melancholia from being reduced to an individual experience since mothering fosters a community of melancholics. It strengthens loss and ensures that it is sustained across generations. Melancholic motherwork represents the capacity of melancholia to sustain loss because it has the potential to reproduce it.

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