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Affecting Citizenship: the Materiality of Melancholia

I'd like to begin with a very rare occurrence: an academic paper which makes front page news.

Written by two University of Toronto sociologists, Jeffrey Reitz and Rupa Banerjee, "Racial

Inequality, Social Cohesion and Policy Issues in Canada" was published last month by the

Institute for Research in Public Policy (IRPP) based in Montreal. Even before its official

publication, this paper is already the most downloaded paper ever in the existence of the IRPP.

On Friday, January 12, 2007, it got front-page treatment from the *Globe and Mail* with an article

by Marina Jimenez. The Reitz and Banerjee document can be downloaded from [www.irpp.org](http://www.irpp.org).

Analyzing 2002 Statistics Canada data from the Ethnic Diversity Survey, Reitz and Banerjee

conclude that "racial gaps in integration emerge as more significant for the second generation

than for their immigrant parents." They make clear that these lower levels of integration are not

related to income levels and that the "experiences of discrimination and vulnerability... are

especially salient in the second generation."

Partway through her piece, Jimenez, who is identified in her byline as the *Globe's* immigration reporter, writes, “[T]he researchers found integration is impeded by the perception of discrimination, and vulnerability – defined as *feeling* uncomfortable in social situations due to racial background and a fear of suffering a racial attack” (my emphasis). Jimenez picks up this language of vulnerability, feeling and fear directly from Reitz and Banerjee’s document. Much of the language of their research, both the questions in the survey and in their analysis of the data, relies upon the language of feeling.

I find this report fascinating for all kinds of reasons but let me highlight two that are salient for me today: the report suggests that there is a relationship between feeling and citizenship; and it suggests that certain kinds of feelings – vulnerability and fear – can become more intense over time for racial minority subjects. That is, it marks an inverse relation between feeling and citizenship: feeling is connected to citizenship and the greater the racialized subject’s claim may seem to be to Canadian citizenship, the more she will feel alienated from it.

In thinking through this inverse relation, my paper makes three broad moves: One, I suggest that citizenship needs to be understood as an affective relation; two, that melancholia, racial melancholia specifically, is constitutive of what I have argued elsewhere as diasporic citizenship; and three, that affect has a materiality and that there is a materiality to racial melancholia which lies in everyday processes such as cooking and eating. I suggest that this understanding of the materiality of racial melancholia enables a shift from focusing upon *individual* injury to *collectivities* borne out of the losses of dislocation. In focusing on the material practices of racial melancholia, I want to move the discussion from the psychic domain, where the individual psyche is still the informing model, to the domain of reproduction – food, the family, the transmission of culture and memory.

In making these three moves, I want to find a way to resist the overwhelmingly dominant narrative of generations and the progress through generations which structures contemporary discussions of citizenship and racialization – I think here not only of Retiz and Banerjee’s report but also the discussions around the Paris riots and the London bombing in the summer of 2005.

### Citizenship and Affect

There are a lot of discussions of citizenship which take for granted what it might be, its genealogy and the hypocrisies and violences of its legacies. In arguing that citizenship is an affective relation, I want to return to the French 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. In this turn, I am heavily indebted to Susan Maslan’s reading and in particular her re-reading of Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*. In her essay, “The Feeling Citizen,” she argues that Agamben’s suggestion that the 1789 Declaration made the figure of man the subject of rights and thus of biopolitics fails to historicize the category of the human in 1789. Contrary to Agamben’s tracing of “man” as organic biological life from Greek philosophy, Maslan notes that “by 1789 the figure of man has been both rationalized (in the sense of becoming an object of demographic and economic study) and sentimentalized. As Maslan observes in another essay, “The Anti-Human,” for many eighteenth-century thinkers from Abbe Gregoire to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the conception of humanity “privileges above all sensibility: human beings are those who suffer, who are touched by the feelings of others, who are happy and, especially, unhappy. The capacity to *feel*, rather than the capacity to *reason*, is the necessary condition for inclusion into the category of the human” (373). Maslan’s overarching project is to examine the gap between the figure of man and the figure of the citizen in the 1789 Declaration. It is a gap which Agamben

obscures and which, she hopes, will illuminate the inhumane heart of contemporary citizenship. As Maslan observes, the gap between man and citizen emerges with particular force in the context of race. She writes: “Asians and Africans, both favorite French examples of oppressed peoples, would be recognized by the Declaration not as citizens of France, of course, but rather in their capacity as *men* – a title which confers upon them a body of rights that must be acknowledged and recognized by all other human beings” (“Anti-Human” 360). Thus, the radicalism of Toussaint L’Ouverture’s Haiti lies not in the claims to humanity, but in the claim to French citizenship and the title of *citoyen*.

As Maslan shows, feeling enables citizenship. For Maslan, sentimentality, feeling, offers “a means to bridge the violent division between ‘politically qualified life’ and ‘simple, natural life.’ This may help explain the central place of happiness and unhappiness in the 1789 *Declaration*” (81). The hazy concepts of happiness and unhappiness function as the precise hyphen of the figure of the “man-citizen” in Agamben’s work.

And yet, melancholy, racial melancholia in particular, can be seen as something which works against citizenship. That is, it can be seen as something which hangs on to a past which is past, and which inhibits incorporation into the larger body politic. The Reitz and Banerjee report does invite that kind of reading: we have here an entire generation of visible minority immigrants who insist, despite the many privileges accorded to them by virtue of their tenure in Canada, on *feeling* vulnerable and alienated. In contrast, I want to argue that racial melancholia enables contemporary citizenship for diasporic subjects and it is precisely these feelings which make citizenship possible. As Maslan notes, “Sentimentalizing the ‘human’ of human rights implied a shift from bodies and their sufferings, to persons and their unhappinesses, from biology to the mental and emotional cognates of physical suffering” (“Dream” 80-81). Racial melancholia

resolves the split between man and citizen for the racialized subject by shifting the emphasis from the racialized body to the feelings of racialization – vulnerability, fear, grief. Understanding citizenship as an affective relation does not collapse the violence of the split between man and citizen. Rather, it makes that division visible and refuses it at the same time. It resists that tricky double move embedded in the Declaration where Asians and Africans can be both human and non-citizens by insisting that the failure to accept the constitutive function of feelings for citizenship returns us to the monstrous legacies of citizen divorced from the figure of human.

### Racial Melancholia and Structures of Feeling

A concept that is becoming increasingly important for North American-Asian literary and cultural studies, racial melancholia raises the problem of the relationship between grief and grievance. The refusal to be cured of sadness is an affect working against the lures of assimilation. In *The Melancholy of Race* Anne Anlin Cheng suggests that racialized communities in the United States (the site of her investigation) are bound not by ethnicity but by grief. Reconsidering the bonds and the boundaries of grieving, Cheng suggests that private grief teaches “us about the disadvantages and advantages of forming a collective communal identity united not by ethnic homogeneity but by racial grievance” (91). Cheng takes up the division between mourning and melancholia in Freud’s thinking and argues that the pathologization of melancholia signals a coercive valorization of particular notions of psychic health. Where for Freud, the melancholic subject is one who narcissistically remains tied to the object of loss, for Cheng this attachment to loss points to a larger refusal to “get over” losses which have yet to be recognized. “Melancholia,” Cheng suggests, “is pathological; it is interminable in nature and

refuses substitution.... The melancholic, one might say, is psychically stuck” (8). For Cheng, the cultural assumptions around health which preoccupy dominant North American culture are questionable at best and the presumption of a cure “remains dubious so long as assimilation reinforces the logic of incorporation” (94). The idea of a cure can function as a form of coercion. The injunction to “move on” demands a forgetting.

The problem is not, of course, quantifying grievance, but the endlessness of grief. While grievances may or may not be settled by million-dollar packages, grief remains. It is transmitted. It is reproduced in the formation of diasporic subjects who challenge dominant notions of citizenship even as they declare their unambiguous status as citizens. Cheng’s theory of racial melancholia does not make clear enough the distinction between grief and grievance. Grief is the excess. Grievances can be addressed within the realm of civil society but grief cannot necessarily be redressed. In thinking through the relationship between grief and grievance, we must not only recuperate the psychic for discussions of race and difference, but we must also take up seriously the collectivity of grief, the modes of its transmission and its emergence out of formations which extend beyond the individual psyche. As David Eng and David Kazanjian’s corrective to Cheng’s reading of Freud suggests,

Freud also casts doubt on the inevitability of [the distinction between mourning and melancholia] when he writes, “It is really only because we know so well how to explain [mourning] that this attitude does not seem to be pathological.” Were one to understand melancholia better, Freud implies, one would no longer insist on its pathological nature. In this spirit, we suggest that a better understanding of melancholic attachments to loss might depathologize those attachments, making visible not only their social bases but also their creative, unpredictable, political aspects. (3)

I want to suggest that racial melancholia's attachment to loss lies in the perpetual losses exacted upon diasporic subjects in the name of citizenship.

Citizenship demands a suspension of interest – in Canada, a term such as “special interest” would have particular resonance – and a reliance upon disinterest. In other words, it asks for the suspension of the particular so that the universal might triumph. As Frantz Fanon notes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the structure of the family, the white family specifically, enables this move from the particular to the universal in that the “white family is the workshop in which one is shaped and trained for life in society” (149). However, as Fanon recognizes, the postcolonial family does not lend itself to this move from the particularity of the family to the universality of society. He writes:

As long as he remains among his own people, the little black follows very nearly the same course as the little white. But if he goes to Europe, he will have to reappraise his lot. For the Negro in France, which is his country, will feel different from other people.... Now, the Antillean family has for all practical purposes no connection with the national – that is, the French or European – structure. The Antillean has therefore to choose between his family and European society. (149)

Thus, when the postcolonial subject becomes diasporic, the family no longer functions as the basis for entry into larger society and the realm of citizenship. On the contrary, the diasporic subject must choose between the particularity of the non-white family and citizenship. It is an impossible choice.

We are left with inhabiting contradiction, with the contingencies of histories that are not our own and with the contingent conditions of their transmission. It is the question of transmission that brings me to the materiality of affect. While there is certainly some important

material available on transmission and affect at the moment – and I think here in particular of Teresa Brennan’s work on the subject – I want to think about the ways in which the persistence of certain kinds of feelings across generations and communities is something more than the neurological and biochemical process which Brennan takes up. I suggest that we think of racial melancholia as a profoundly social condition which marks the violence of the process necessary for the reproduction of diasporic citizens. In trying to grapple with the affect and transmission within the context of production and reproduction, I also want to extend Brennan’s work into an understanding of transmission which is not simply horizontal (i.e. in this room, across a particular community) but also vertical (through generations).

Returning then to Reitz and Banerjee’s paper, the most shocking thing for liberal Canadians about these research findings is that second generation visible minority immigrants seem to feel that they experience more discrimination and racism, not less. It is one thing for new immigrants to feel alienated from the larger body politic, but for second generation immigrants who presumably carry with them all the advantages of language, education, growing up in conditions of relative political stability and so on, for these children of immigrants to feel even farther from Canadianness than their parents, that seems to signal either a failure of the policy of official multiculturalism (as Reitz and Banerjee suggest) or that they might be too spoiled to be grateful for all that they have (as Jiminez’s article hints at). However, neither of these conclusions is satisfying and both point to the problem with understanding racialized communities in terms of generations. Let me suggest instead that Reitz and Banerjee’s research points not to a generational issue per se, but to the persistence of the violences of dislocation and social reproduction—specifically, to the violence of reproducing diasporic citizen subjects,

subjects who choose again and again between the particularity of the non-white family and the universality of citizenship.

Let me turn to literature, to the title story of Madeleine Thien's *Simple Recipes* as a way of illustrating my point. Partway through the story, the narrator's father beats her brother for refusing to eat dinner. The violence erupts with breathtaking suddenness out of the quiet domesticity of her father in the kitchen, making rice, placing the fish in the wok. When the brother gags on a piece of cauliflower and spits it back on his plate, it begins. The father puts his chopsticks down and smashes his hand into the brother's face. The brother attempts to stab the father with a fork. Later, the father beats the brother with a bamboo pole. Thien writes:

The bamboo drops silently. It rips the skin on my brother's back. I cannot hear any sound. A line of blood edges quickly across his body.

The pole rises again and comes down. I am afraid of bones breaking.

My father lifts his arm once more.

On the floor, my brother cries into the carpet, pawing at the ground. His knees folded into his chest, the crown of his head burrowing down. His back is hunched over and I can see his spine, little bumps on his skin.

The bamboo smashes into bone and the scene in my mind bursts into a million white pieces.... I feel loose, deranged, as if everything in the known world is ending right here. (15-16)

This violence threatens to undo everything. But the world does not end. It continues as it was and it does not. It is tempting to read this scene as one of intergenerational conflict and misunderstanding connected to racial self-hatred. The brother rejects the Asian food and the

father attempts to comfort the brother the next morning with explicitly non-Asian food, French toast. However, as Lisa Lowe argues,

interpreting Asian-American culture exclusively in terms of master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian-American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians. The reduction of the cultural politics of racialized ethnic groups, like Asian Americans, to first-generation/second-generation struggles displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition. (135)

Thus, reading the scene of domestic violence in “Simple Recipes” as one of intergenerational conflict risks obscuring the social bases of this violence. It is too easy to read this scene as a depiction of the inevitable break between one generation and another, one culture clashing with another, one family working through the difficulties and pains of assimilation. I want to suggest a more difficult reading. I want to suggest that this scene of violence and rejection is actually about the *connection* rather than the breaks between generations and across communities.

Further, I want to argue that this violence has a social basis and that it signals the violences of the social reproduction of diasporic subjects.

In turning to the sphere of reproduction and a materialist understanding of melancholia, I am trying to address what I see as a major problem with the temporality of grief in current discussions of racial melancholia. If we follow Cheng, then the diasporic subject is doomed to the endlessness of melancholia. If we do not, then the diasporic subject appears to be lured by assimilation into becoming a healthy subject whose losses have been successfully mourned. I find this polarization of the temporality of grief deeply unsatisfying. In the context of a scene of domestic violence such as that of Thien’s story, we are left either with recuperating melancholia

and thus the horizontal implications of that violence, a move which tacitly condemns diasporic subjects to an endless “cycle” of violence, or with falling into a linear, progressivist logic which expects one generation to succeed another, thus reducing that scene to that of cultural clashes and intergenerational conflict.

In trying to resolve this polarization of the temporality of grief, I want to argue for a more materialist, Marxist, engagement with melancholia through Raymond Williams’ concept of structures of feeling. As Sianne Ngai notes about Williams’ concept, it is important to remember that structures of feelings are temporally inflected (359). For Williams, structures of feeling are not “institutional” or “formal” (131). Rather, they are not yet articulated “*changes of presence...* that although they are emergent or pre-emergent... do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and exert effective limits on experience and on action” (131-132). Structures of feeling are premonitory, they are “on the edge of semantic availability” (134). They are not articulated like ideologies or institutions, but they are nonetheless deeply social registers which exert pressures, which can, I suggest, have a role in social reproduction. Crucially, for Williams, structures of feeling are explicitly not personal but social. Further, they are about futures and not pasts. Distinguishing between Williams’ structures of feeling and emotion, Ngai observes that emotions have “histories and come heavily saturated with cultural meanings and values” (359). In contrast, structures of feeling are, according to Williams, “embryonic” (131), “a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized to be social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic and even isolating” (132). I suggest that the violence of racial melancholia functions as a structure of feeling precisely in that it is a profoundly social experience which continues to be mistaken for a private one. To mistake the many, many scenes of domestic violence in Asian Canadian and Asian American literature –

think for example, of Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*, the novels of Lois-Ann Yamanaka and Wayson Choy, the stories of Evelyn Lau, the poetry of Fred Wah – to mistake these scenes as mere domestic conflicts is to miss entirely the social basis of the affective register they intimate.

Understanding racial melancholia as a structure of feeling enables an engagement with the ways in which the racial melancholic anticipates the violence of social reproduction. It is not as formal or as institutional as ideology, but it is nonetheless firmly within a relation of production and reproduction. Attending to the materiality of racial melancholia thus brings us to its proleptic value. Cheng and others discuss racial melancholia in terms of losses which have already happened, grievances over things which must be grieved. To think of racial melancholia in its materiality illuminates the productivity of its relation to the future and resolves the polarization of the temporality of racial grief.

Racial melancholia is more than a state of psychic injury which embraces the restless ghosts of past injustice. The violence of reproduction reproduces the violence of dislocation, of the family and the home as a site of deep connection and intense alienation. Thinking about the materiality of melancholia calls us to consider the doubled experience of belonging and unbelonging, of the anguish of living with the contingencies of citizenship even as the demands of diaspora tear away at those contingencies.

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