

The Melancholic Subject: Exploring Loss and Relationships in African American and Asian  
American Fiction

by

Melissa Sue Smoak

April, 2014

Director of Thesis/Dissertation: Su-ching Huang

Major Department: English

The goal of this thesis is to closely examine the psychological effects of oppression for both African Americans and Asian Americans. The fiction created by writers of these ethnic groups and the characters they create that are of these ethnic groups are the subject of my inquiry. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* are the selected novels under investigation.

This thesis asks readers to consider the following questions: How do minority groups escape repression? How do African American men and women feel about themselves and their communities, when they are taught by US society to hate themselves? How does the noncitizen define him/herself? How do children of immigrants end up feeling about themselves?

A common thread linking all of these questions together is the psychological response of the individual to a dominant, racist society. Through a psychoanalytic lens, the following chapters use Freud's classic theory of mourning and melancholia, as well Eng and Han's modern revision of his theories, to explore the thoughts, words, and actions of each writer's melancholic characters.



The Melancholic Subject: Exploring Loss and Relationships in African American and Asian  
American Fiction

A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of English

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts Degree in English

by

Melissa Sue Smoak

April, 2014

© Melissa S. Smoak, 2014

The Melancholic Subject: Exploring Loss and Relationships in African American and Asian American Fiction

by

Melissa Sue Smoak

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF  
DISSERTATION/THESIS:

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Su-ching Huang, Ph.D.)

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Julie Fay, M.F.A)

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Reginald Watson, Ph.D.)

CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT  
OF ENGLISH:

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Jeffrey Johnson, Ph.D.)

DEAN OF THE  
GRADUATE SCHOOL:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my director, Dr. Su-ching Huang, for all of her thoughtful comments and suggestions. Her continued support and questioning of my ideas helped propel my writing and thinking to new heights. Additionally, I would like to thank my children, who have inspired me to follow my heart and never give up on my dreams.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page	.....	i
Copyright Page	.....	ii
Signature Page	.....	iii
Acknowledgements	.....	iv
Introduction	.....	1
Chapter One: Intergenerational Depression: Tracing Melancholia and Racial Injury from Mother to Daughter in Toni Morrison's <i>The Bluest Eye</i> .....		10
Chapter Two: American Citizenship: Exploring Melancholia and Citizenship in Alice Walker's <i>The Third Life of Grange Copeland</i> .....		26
Chapter Three: The Immigrant's Tale: Identities Built on Loss in Fae Myenne Ng's <i>Bone</i> .....		43
Conclusion	.....	57
Works Cited	.....	59

## Introduction

Our society is currently in a time influenced by "world wars, local wars, civil wars, ideological wars, ethnic wars, the two atomic bomb attacks, the cold war, genocides, famines, [and] epidemics" (Berger 572). As a result of such catastrophes, many peoples' pasts are flooded with images of hate, greed, torture, violence, and even death. These memories become ingrained in the cultural fabric of our communities, and they play a significant role in shaping the psyches of America's minorities by leaving wounds and psychological scars that can be traced back several generations.

Literature becomes an important place to turn in navigating through these modes of terror. Citing Cathy Caruth, James Berger suggests stories become crucial because they provide space where "trauma becomes text" and "wound becomes voice" (577). Putting "trauma" or "wound" into words allows for a cathartic narrative experience, as the text offers a therapeutic release for both writers and readers. Additionally, the text allows a space for writers and readers to examine the impact these social and cultural tragedies have on the development of an individual's identity. In this thesis, I have narrowed my studies to two specific minority groups, African Americans and Asian Americans, who have endured such wounds to the psyche and experienced identities developed from tragic social and cultural events.

It is imperative to first consider what cultural and social factors have contributed to both of these minority groups' psychological development. In connection to the African American psyche, slavery can register as a historical trauma that continues to plague the existence and formation of individual and collective black identities. Ron Eyerman thoroughly discusses this

issue in his research on slavery and African American collective identity formation. He suggests that slavery is not just an institution that has shaped the African American identity; it is a “collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people” (60). He further contends that slavery works as a unifying force, and it is within “the memory of slavery and its representation through speech and art” that individuals are able to see its influence, as it filters beyond its perimeters to infiltrate the hearts and minds of those who did not experience it first-hand (61). Eyerman, echoing the thoughts of Caruth, points out that a traumatic experience such as slavery is considered a cultural trauma because it encompasses a “reflective process” that “links past to present through representations and imaginations” (62). When exploring texts written by African Americans, these memories of oppression and cultural trauma manifest themselves as instances of race, class, and gender inequalities, which work against the psychological development of the individual. As a result, many African American fiction writers create characters who are caught in a world where they ultimately feel rejected by the dominant, white culture. Consequently, they are characterized as being both socially and emotionally crippled.

Likewise, the Asian American psyche can also be viewed as a mindset that is formed as a result of a cultural trauma. Asians in America have experienced similar crippling identity formation experiences based on race, class, and gender. Yet, trauma does not have to be reduced to one life-altering event or disaster such as slavery. Rather, it can be an ongoing and recurring traumatic event which took place in the past and continues to affect the present. For Asian Americans, I suggest it is the experience of immigration and the pressure to assimilate that has created a cultural trauma. As a result of America's harmful ideology, Asian Americans have been subject to a variety of stereotypes such as the model minority, the perpetual foreigner, and the

unassimilable alien. According to America's dominant white culture, they are stigmatized as second class citizens.

Since both of these minority groups have suffered through and continue to be impacted by events that qualify as cultural traumas, it is important to consider what types of stories are produced by and about such ethnic groups. Moreover, it is crucial to examine what themes and motifs these texts yield. I argue these events impact the development of the African American and Asian American identity, thus resulting in stories where the main characters' identities are fashioned out of loss. The instances of trauma experienced by both these cultural groups has led to characters who find themselves victims to melancholia because they are not able to successfully fit into their antagonistic environments. Adopting a psychoanalytical approach to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, my thesis explores the effect of loss on the individual's psyche. My close reading of each text heavily hinges on two theories: Sigmund Freud's early Twentieth-century studies of mourning and melancholia and David Eng and Shinhee Han's more recent formulation of racial melancholia.

Sigmund Freud's theory, as laid out in his article "Mourning and Melancholia," from 1917, begins with a brief discussion of the commonalities and differences of these two conditions. As Freud saw it, both originate from the same root causes, which he identifies as the loss of a loved one or the loss of an abstract ideal such as love or liberty. However, he suggests the mourner is able to successfully let go of the lost object by selecting a new object to absorb the individual's affections. The melancholic individual, in contrast, is unable to let go of the lost object; thus, he or she is propelled into a state of prolonged and extreme depression that does not find reprieve. Yet, melancholy is not simply depression, for Freud acknowledged the

distinguishing factors of the melancholic's state of mind to be that of dejection, self-hate, and (often) delusion (243-244).

Retreating inwards, the melancholic individual possesses a need for the lost love object, which may in fact be "withdrawn from [the individual's] consciousness" (244). The melancholic individual, in many cases, does not even know the source of his or her own suffering and grief. The individual's thoughts and actions stem from sources that may be unknown to the individual, making the patient's treatment all the more impossible to institute.

The distinguishing factor between mourning and melancholia, as proposed by Freud, is that melancholy results in a punishment of the ego:

In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished." (246)

This invisible, intangible loss of self leaves the patient at his or her lowest mental and moral points in life. It is at this point that Freud argues the ego often begins to split (247). This fissure allows the ego to attach itself to someone or something new. In many cases, Freud acknowledges this split or fissure as a way for an individual's conscience to attack his or her unconscious (247). The melancholic individual is overcome with a "circuitous path of self-punishment," in which he or she seeks revenge, but may aim for him/herself rather than the source of the pain (251). Ultimately, Freud believes the result of self-hate and torture is suicide (247). However, the suicide does not have to be literal. The figurative death of the self can be characterized as cutting off the reality of one's self and replacing it with the feeling of others; consequently, the individual with melancholia may become susceptible to stereotypes placed onto them from

society (247-248). Like a sponge, the individual absorbs the negative attitudes and judgments he or she is subjected to, and he or she often internalizes those feelings while simultaneously projecting them onto family members or members from his or her own communities.

Eng and Han's theory of melancholia, as outlined in their article "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," begins by acknowledging one big difference between their beliefs and those of Freud. Eng and Han point out that Freud's work centered on the individual's response to loss, while their studies are concerned with exploring collective responses to loss and identifications of minority groups, specifically Asian Americans.

Eng and Han's theory focuses on the dominant role American society plays in threatening the psyche of Asian Americans and other repressed groups. Concentrating on immigration and the process of assimilation, Eng and Han suggest an individual's lost love object, as proposed by Freud, is abstract. In fact, for Asian Americans and other marginalized groups, it is specifically a loss which results from the impossibility of attaining "a set of dominant norms and ideals" (344). They note that even though Asian Americans "may be U.S.-born or ... may have resided here for many years, [they] are continually perceived as eccentric to the nation" (345). They contend that Asian Americans are often viewed as "pathological" to the U.S. and as "hyper 'model minorities'" (345). Given this insight, the ideal of whiteness becomes a "fantasy and lost ideal" that the individual can never attain (345). Thus, the process of assimilating into mainstream, white society leads the minority through a "series of failed and unresolved integrations" (344). In other words, the immigrant who does not successfully assimilate into mainstream US culture is the one who is subject to melancholia. Given this fact, the immigrant who does manage to successfully assimilate into his or her new American culture is one who is considered to have successfully mourned the loss of his or her love object, which Eng and Han suggest can be an

ideal involving “the reiterated loss of whiteness” (344). However, by conforming to dominant culture, the mourner begins to suppress parts of his or her past culture that are important to maintaining a healthy identity. According to Eng and Han, the melancholic individual is the one who resists the need to assimilate and holds onto his or her first culture by refusing to completely abandon his or her old world customs and traditions for the sake of new ones (344-346). From this insight, one can draw the conclusion that mourning may be harmful to the individual's psyche because it follows an assimilationist ideology that does not allow for hybridization of cultures or diversity. Unlike Freud's definition, Eng and Han's view of melancholia suggests that it can be productive, as it requires the individual to value his or her past culture and not become someone else just because he or she may feel pressured by America to change. In this way, Eng and Han's definition of racial melancholia depathologizes it and brings about an outcome of cultural pride and community.

Even though Eng and Han believe melancholia to be productive, they address negative emotional outcome of the minority's exclusion from mainstream society. They suggest it allows for the collective group to be viewed under “forced psychic amnesia,” which produces a “negative or absent presence” that acts as a “national haunting” (347). To flesh out the idea of a “national haunting,” Eng and Han discuss America's history of Asian exclusion by means of various legislation passed since mid-nineteenth century. They suggest the United States suffers from a “misremembering of these exclusions,” which facilitates an “erasure and loss of repressed Asian American histories and identities” (347). The “national haunting,” as they call it, becomes known as America's denial of the loss of white purity. In other words, it is not only the unassimilated immigrant that suffers from melancholia; the United States also suffers from melancholia with its disavowal of the loss of white supremacy.

Moving through their discussion of “national haunting” and “psychic amnesia,” Eng and Han introduce the concept of “psychic splitting and national disease,” in which the immigrant is forced into “mimicry, ambivalence, and the stereotype” (349). Eng and Han want readers to understand that these acts all set the Asian immigrant up to fail, for the immigrant will never be quite good enough, never quite white enough (349-350). This seems, however, to be problematic. On one hand, if the individual is able to successfully assimilate, then he or she is said to be successfully mourning. Yet, because of mimicry, ambivalence, and the stereotype, the Asian immigrant can never truly assimilate, as they will always be seen, in some small way, as “Other.” If this is the case, all immigrants can be defined as living in states of constant, unresolvable states of melancholia, without the option of mourning. Eng and Han work through this dilemma by arguing that assimilation is a “negotiation between mourning *and* melancholia,” and these two conditions must “coexist” without ever being thought of separately (363). Due to this coexistence, melancholia becomes a “structure of feeling” that can ultimately be politically or socially empowering rather than pathological (344). Eng and Han contend that melancholia can be viewed “as *conflict* rather than *damage*” (363). The word “conflict” suggests resolution with some form of healing taking place. As a means to “communal rebuilding,” racial melancholia allows for groups to work on repairing their identities, forging new bonds instead of blindly accepting old ones. It is as if one is able to find the good by accessing the bad, for “it is the melancholic who helps us come face to face with the social truth” (365).

To begin my investigation, chapter one takes a close look into Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. This novel provides a deep look into the African American psyche and how it can be shaped as well as destroyed by a dominant, racist, white community. Internalizing the negative attitudes of their antagonistic communities, Pauline Breedlove and her daughter, Pecola

Breedlove, become Morrison's vehicle for exploring what can happen when an individual becomes self-loathing as a result of said racism. Throughout this chapter, I use Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia, specifically his attention to delusion and split personality, to discuss the depression of both female characters. I examine Pauline's characterization by her loss of two specific love objects—love, as defined by her relationships, and beauty, as defined by her blackness. It is through the loss of these two love objects that we come to understand Pauline's severe melancholic depression and how it creates a racial injury that ultimately crosses generational borders and is inherited by her daughter, Pecola. The end of this section traces Pecola's melancholia and discusses how her interactions with her mother and her peers ultimately lead her to a life of self-loathing rather than one of self-love. From violence (Pauline) to silence (Pecola), we can see how the melancholy experience by both female characters hinders their growth and functionality in mainstream society.

Chapter two, which discusses Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, is centered on another African American text that deals with the crippling effects of melancholia as a result of feeling insignificant in a dominant, white society that does not place any value on the black individual's existence. Walker creates male characters who are stuck in never-ending cycles of melancholia, in which their lost love object is their own American citizenship. Like Morrison's novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* also focuses heavily on familial relationships and the impact the parental relationship has on the development of the child. However, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* provides readers with the male perspective and addresses the motif of silence and domestic violence as a result of the racism that has been internalized by black men living in the rural, racist south. By following Grange Copeland through his three lives, this section examines how an individual can fall in and out of

melancholia, to finally resist it and successfully mourn. Additionally, this chapter takes a close look at Grange's son, Brownfield. Through the development of his character, readers are exposed to the ill effects of melancholia when it cannot be resisted. By examining his dreams, his ambivalent love for the South, and his need to project his feelings of hate onto his wife, we see how melancholia can destroy the African American male.

Finally, chapter three examines the Asian American novel *Bone*, by Fae Myenne Ng. While the previous chapters deal with pieces of fiction centered on minority individuals who feel like outsiders despite being born and raised in America, this section examines what can happen to the development of the psyche when the individual comes to America as an immigrant and is pressured to become American. My examination of *Bone* looks closely at the mourning and melancholia that results from having to choose between the immigrant's old-world traditions and new-world customs. Considering Eng and Han's theory of racial melancholia, I suggest that the parents come to represent the process of mourning through assimilation. These characters show how melancholia can be productive, as well as allows for the understanding of how America's melancholia is to blame for one's failure to assimilate. Additionally, by examining the eldest, Leila, and her attempts to make sense of her sister's death, this section discusses the significance of the novel's structure and Ona's death/suicide.

Melancholic readings of all three novels will provide the opportunity for deep exploration of the mental and emotional outcomes of individuals, who have been forced to conform to America's ideal of perfection. Living in oppressive, abusive, and (often) violent environments, the characters of all three novels help readers understand that the blame is misplaced, and that mourning and melancholia cannot be avoided unless America changes itself.

# **Intergenerational Depression: Tracing Melancholia and Racial Injury from Mother to Daughter in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

## Chapter One

Many African American writers use their stories to comment on the psyche of the African American female by exploring the roles they play within their families and communities. Strong, black female writers such as Toni Morrison use their stories to counteract the stereotypical roles of the black female that are often created by narratives from white society. Parvin Ghasemi and Rasool Hajizadeh, in their discussion of Toni Morrison's use of black mother stereotypes, point out traditional roles of black mothers are "born out of the system of slavery" and create images of black women who are indestructible (477). They further contend that "this ideology has served to position black mothers in restrictive roles and has denied them the potential for individual growth and autonomy" (477). What Ghasemi and Hajizadeh are proposing is the roles of black women in fiction are limited to emotionless vessels that are capable of insurmountable volumes of ridicule and pain, both physically and mentally. These women are characterized to take on the weight of the world, and they are usually defined by someone else rather than by themselves.

However, in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents readers with a counterargument to the stereotypes noted above. In turn, she presents readers with the tragic story of the Breedlove family who is ultimately destroyed by the antagonistic forces of a racist, white society as well as a self-loathing, black community. Focusing on the relationship between

mother and daughter, Morrison uses Pauline Breedlove's character to explore the outcomes of a mother who “reject[s] the socially accepted notions of motherhood” by refusing the standardized role of the strong, enduring black mother (Ghasemi and Hajizadeh 478). Instead, Pauline is a woman who has her own agenda and is able to “recognize the value of her own identity” (478). Yet, Morrison does not reveal the happy ending every woman desires, for Pauline and the other black females in *The Bluest Eye* do not reach superior, autonomous, and independent states. Instead, we are left with a mother who is unable to see her true identity and potential as a woman come to fruition, and she ends up hating herself and her children. Morrison uses Pauline’s character to show how a black woman’s self-image can be shaped and ultimately destroyed by a racist society.

Using Freud's theories of mourning and melancholia, along with David Eng and Shinhee Han's formulation of racial melancholia, this chapter will provide a psychoanalytic lens from which to view the actions of the mother, Pauline Breedlove, and how her depression/melancholia is transmitted to her daughter, Pecola Breedlove.

While many texts portray black women as strong and capable, Morrison uses Pauline’s character to counter argue such notions by showing how black women can also be vulnerable. We see this distinction very clear in Pauline’s depiction of Pecola’s birth:

When he left off, some more doctors come. One old one and some young ones. The old one was learning the young ones about babies. Showing them how to do. When he got to me he said now these here women you don’t have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses. The young ones smiled a little. They looked at my stomach and between my legs. They never said nothing to me. Only one looked at me. Looked at my face, I mean. I looked

right back at him. He dropped his eyes and turned red. He knowed, I reckon, that maybe I weren't no horse foaling. (Morrison 124- 125)

Displaying Pauline at one of her most sacred and vulnerable moments of womanhood, childbirth, Morrison illustrates for readers how women such as Pauline are dehumanized and presented as objects or animals incapable of a complex range of feelings and emotions. I suggest that Morrison's goal was not to demean or display black women as weak and incapable; rather, she wanted to demonstrate for readers the fragile state of mind these women experience as a result of being ridiculed and dehumanized.

Even though this passage works to humanize Pauline, we never see her as a strong, independent woman. She was never a privileged girl; in fact, our first in-depth description of her paints her youth as one of invisibility and worthlessness:

Slight as it was, her [deformed foot] explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done; why no one ever remarked on her food preferences...why nobody teased her; why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace. Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot.

(Morrison 110-111)

Retreating into herself, Pauline was able to find solace in controlling her environment. Keeping her home and kitchen organized gave her the control she lost as a result of her deformity. Pauline attributes her own downfall to her deformity as she states, "[I] never felt at home anywhere or that [I] belonged anyplace. [My] general feeling of separateness and unworthiness [I] [blame] on [my] foot" (Morrison 111). She is highly conscious of her suffering

and is even able to assign her dissatisfaction to a concrete object. This would be characteristic of Sigmund Freud's process of mourning in which he claims individuals are conscious of the process of grief and all "inhibition[s] and loss of interest are fully accounted for by the work of the mourning, in which the ego is absorbed (244).

However, there is more at work here with Pauline's mental health that Morrison wants readers to consider. While Pauline is aware of an ailment that ostracizes her from her family, there are other forces locked in her subconscious working against her. Her feelings of extreme depression/ melancholia can be traced to her experiences with love. At the young, impressionable age of fifteen, she finds herself longing to be desired and touched. Pining for the stimulation of her senses at the wake of her puberty, "these feelings translated themselves into extreme melancholy. She thought of the death of newborn things, lonely roads, and strangers who appear out of nowhere..." (Morrison 113). These instances of fantasy are reflective of Freud's clinical definition of melancholia in which he notes individuals cannot simply let go of the lost love object. Rather, they find themselves "turning away from reality ... and ... clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis (Freud 243). Pauline's melancholic break from reality allows her to recoil into a life of fantasy, living out her hopes and dreams in her heart and head rather than with her family, community and society. It would appear that the lost love object, as proposed by Freud's theory, is connected to love and could be described as her loss of self-love and familial love due to her deformity.

Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia suggests an individual can avoid slipping into melancholia as long as he or she is successful in the "withdrawal of the libido from [the lost love] object and a displacement of it on to a new one" (248). If this switch in mental focus does not happen, "the shadow of the object [will fall] upon the ego" (248). Thus, an individual will

become melancholic or depressed if he or she cannot find another object or ideal to consume his or her attentions and affections. In the case of Pauline, she was able to complete the process of mourning by allowing the idea of romantic love to become her new object, as it replaced her desire for self and family love, the original lost love objects/ideals. Meeting her husband Cholly for the first time became a transition moment for her mental state as it awoke feelings within her soul she never knew existed and gave her a new outlook on life. For a brief time, “she was secure and grateful; he was kind and lively. She had not known there was so much laughter in the world” (Morrison 116).

Unfortunately, her happiness was short-lived. After marrying and settling with Cholly into her new life and role as a wife, she decided to head north with him for new beginnings. Pauline, however, is faced with a type of rejection she had not been exposed to before, and finds herself incapable of settling into and adjusting to her new environment:

I weren't used to so much white folks. The ones I seed before was something hateful, but they didn't come around too much. I mean, we didn't have too much truck with them... Up North they was everywhere—next door, downstairs, all over the streets—and colored folks few and far between. Northern colored folks was different too. Dicty-like. No better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count, 'cept I didn't expect it from them. That was the loneliest time of my life. (Morrison 117)

The prejudice she knew in the south had been a form of repression created and perpetuated by whites. The unfamiliar feelings of being rejected by her own black community worked to further ostracize her. We begin to see Pauline internalize her feelings of her race through fits of anger and hate.

Once again, Pauline finds herself slipping back into a melancholic state and has no one to turn to for comfort and companionship. Rejected by the women in her town, not enough house to keep, and no yard to tend to, Pauline “turned to her husband for reassurance, entertainment, for things to fill the vacant places” (Morrison 117), but quickly realized “Cholly was kindness still, but began to resist her dependence on him” (118). With no release in her physical world, Pauline returned to fantasy: “she stopped staring at the green chairs, at the delivery truck; she went to the movies instead. There in the dark her memory was refreshed, and she succumbed to her earlier dreams” (122). Having been failed by the lost object she had been clinging to with her marriage, Pauline is forced to replace the lost object (romantic love) with a new object/ideal found in the theater – beauty. Along with love, she claims these two concepts are the “most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion” (122). Yet, this replacement of the lost object does not allow Pauline to break a cycle of mourning. Instead, she is propelled into a fantasy world occupied by visions of perfection she can never achieve and expectations she will never meet. Melancholy takes hold of her psyche in a climactic moment when she loses her tooth in the movie theater. At that moment Pauline acknowledges she can never live up to society's ideal concept of beauty, which is rooted in whiteness, and claims “everything went then. Look like I didn't care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly. I still went to the pictures though, but the meanness got worse” (123). Her disregard for her physical appearance becomes symbolic of her mental deterioration as she retreats inside a cinematic shell.

After giving birth to her two children, Sammy and Pecola, Pauline is thrust out of her fantasy world and brought back into reality as she recognizes “she was older now, with no time for dreams and movies” (126). However, Pauline is not able to let go of her feelings of hate and

anger. She is not sure why, but she claims “sometimes I'd catch myself hollering at [my children] and beating them, and I'd feel sorry for them, but I couldn't seem to stop” (124). Freud's theory offers some insight into such behavior when he notes:

If one listens patiently to a melancholic's many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but that with insignificant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love...we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a love object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego.  
(247)

As Freud suggests, individuals who are mourning the loss of an object or idea to the point of melancholia, will project their own feelings of hate and anger onto someone else, specifically the source or reminder of that hate/anger. It would appear that Pauline's loss of beauty led to her hate and anger towards her children whom she claims are ugly, specifically her daughter, of whom she says “I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (Morrison 126). In an essay examining the psychological suffering of Pauline's character as a result of her deteriorating appearance, specifically the loss of her front tooth, James Saunders attributes Pauline's obsession with the movies and fantasy world she has created within her own mind as a result of desiring to be Jean Harlow (194). Further, he argues that Pauline's deteriorating mental state results from an all-knowing power. This omniscient “master,” according to Saunders, is society's standard of beauty, which mirrors the Jean Harlow-type of (white) woman Pauline wishes to be. Once her tooth is gone, her fantasy of ever being beautiful is gone. She is forever doomed to view herself as ugly (194-195). Once this imagined bubble is

burst, Pauline is left to find other outlets to fill her void. Pauline could avoid seeing her messed up hair, disheveled appearance, and missing tooth by not looking in the mirror, but her ugly, poverty-stricken children were physical reminders of her own failures.

Pauline is able to find solace and live out her fantasy of being attractive, loved and accepted through serving a white family, and we are told “All the meaningfulness of her life was in her work (Morrison 102). Even though Pauline is physically present, she is emotionally unavailable to her daughter and would rather care for and nurture her white, pretty family rather than devote love and attention to her black, ugly family.

At this point in the narrative, we witness a fissure in Pauline's identity. Freud mentions this occurrence in his research of melancholia and notes the tendency for “one part of the ego [to set] itself over against the other” in which a “critical agency” also known as the patient's conscience becomes “split off from the ego” (Freud 246). Pauline's ego or sense of self becomes fragmented and split as she takes on both roles of Polly for the wealthy, white Fisher family and Pauline for the poverty-stricken, black Breedlove family. In her white world, “power, praise, and luxury were hers in the [Fisher] household” where she “kept ... order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children” (Morrison 128). This part of herself or identity allows Pauline to assume the roles of caregiver, provider, and nurturer. She is able to assume a worthy position in the white world she had only dreamed about while watching the movies. At last, as Saunders suggests, Pauline is able to fulfill the role of Jean Harlow. At home, however, she remains Pauline who feels alienated and estranged from her family. With “Each member of the [Breedlove] family [living] in his own cell of consciousness,” Pauline is disconnected with her husband and kids (Morrison 34). Sadly, she is

simply known to her own daughter as Mrs. Breedlove (43). This forces Pauline to move through life learning to hate her own existence.

Pauline is aware of her obsessions, both beauty and love, yet she knows there is something else that plagues her emotions. She is conscious of the ways in which she abuses her children and treats them harshly, but she cannot explain why. At this point, it is critical to look beyond Freud's theory to discuss the melancholic behaviors of Pauline. In her research of mother-daughter relationships in African American and Chinese American literature, Lea Delcoco-Fridley suggests that Pauline is desperate to be a good mother to Pecola, but is unable to do so because of society (152-157). Her stance puts the blame on the culture rather than the individual. This is an interesting point in connection to Freud's theory of melancholia. While he does mention briefly in the opening paragraph of "Mourning and Melancholia" the importance of the environment in the development of both conditions, he does not go into detail. Instead, Freud's work centers on the individual's actions and reactions to lost love objects. Delcoco-Fridley also discusses the process of assimilation, attributing Pecola's descent into a world of fantasy fueled by daydreams and delusions of becoming a blue-eyed girl, who is worthy of both white and black people alike, to Pauline's inability to successfully situate herself both racially and culturally into a white dominated society (157-162).

Bringing race and culture to the forefront, this article points to Eng and Han's theory of mourning and melancholia in which they claim melancholia should not be "[cast] as a pathological" process as Freud suggests (343). Instead, they argue it is a "depathologized structure of feeling" that "address[es] group identifications" (343). Focusing their studies on the collective identities of marginalized and minority groups, Eng and Han specifically note a person's lost love object to be the individual's desire to assimilate successfully into American

culture (344-345). For the African American characters in Morrison's text, the process of assimilation would be their ability to live successful, fulfilling lives in a society governed by dominant white norms. This desire of whiteness clearly explains Pauline's obsession with the ideals of love and beauty. The fantasy world she ends up in with hopes of looking and living like Jean Harlow is symbolic of her desire to leave her ugly, black world behind to adopt the beautiful, white world from the movies. The violent thoughts and behaviors she exhibits towards her children are symbolic of the negative racial attitudes she has internalized from her rural, racist, white community.

Pauline, however, is not the focus of Morrison's text. *The Bluest Eye*'s central character is her daughter, Pecola. It is through Pecola's characterization that Morrison works to show readers how society's oppressive and racist attitudes towards black individuals create a racial injury that crosses generational borders. According to a research study on maternal and intergenerational depression conducted by Shaina Katz and Constance Hammen from the University of California and Patricia Brennan from Emory University, parents who are clinically depressed transmit tendencies for "social dysfunction and maladaptive interpersonal cognitions" to their adolescent children (86). They claim young people who are exposed to fits of melancholy from their own parents are preconditioned and most likely themselves to have problems relating to their own family, difficulties with peer relationships, and will suffer from impaired skills (86). Because of her parents' past experiences and the mental trauma they have been exposed to, Pecola is preconditioned to lack the social competency skills necessary to develop a strong, vital sense of self. We clearly see these conditions manifested through Pecola's interactions with others, both family (specifically her mother) and friends.

In her critical article addressing the multiple layers of recognizing and defining racism, Beverly Tatum states “The secondhand information we do receive has often been distorted, shaped by cultural stereotypes, and left incomplete” (5). Here, she is pointing out the devastating results of having to form racial identities based on others’ experiences and perceptions rather than one’s own. This insight sheds light on Pecola’s psychological and social development as we come to know a little girl whose mother stunts her growth rather than aids in her adolescent development. Looking closely at her familial relationships, Morrison establishes clear disconnect between Pecola and her mother, Pauline. For instance, as mentioned earlier, she does not have a connection with her mother as a young girl should and does not even refer to her by name— simply Mrs. Breedlove (Morrison 43).

Morrison mirrors Pecola’s experiences with that of her mother’s when she writes about her first menstrual cycle. Unable to lead by example, Pauline leaves Pecola to face puberty without the loving and nurturing role of a mother to guide her through this moment of self-discovery. Instead, Pecola is scolded and accused of “playing nasty” (Morrison 30). Citing the works of S.T Hauser and E. Kasendorf (1983) and the article “African American Identity: “A Review of Literature” by Janeula Burt and Glennelle Halpin (1998), Paul Mahaffey argues that Pecola’s adolescent state of mind leaves her open and vulnerable during her journey through adolescence (158). Left to wonder what love really is, Pecola, like her mother, must navigate the road to self-love and adolescence by herself. “The result is that [Pecola] is unable to develop any type of racial consciousness that could counteract the degrading influence of a dominant and racist society” (Mahaffey 158). Essentially, Pecola’s mother’s melancholy has been inherited, as Pecola takes on the role of the racially self-loathing victim patterned from her mother. Pecola’s

lost love object becomes the same as her mother's, for she, too, longs for love and beauty, which are both reflective of whiteness as defined by the norms of the dominant culture.

Without supportive, healthy familial models to emulate, Pecola must look to outsiders for identity confirmation. Unfortunately, she is taught to hate herself as her experiences consist of frightening exchanges with individuals in her community such as Mr. Yakobowski. Upon entering his store to buy some candy, Pecola notices he looks at her with "distaste" that "she has seen ... lurking in the eyes of all white people ... [a] distaste [that she thought] must be for her, her blackness" (Morrison 49).

The torment, however, is not limited to individuals from the white community. In fact, most of Pecola's terrifying encounters involving the ridicule of her identity and appearance stem from interactions with individuals of her own race, both from peers and adults. First, she is tormented by a group of black boys who taunt her about the darkness of her skin, while they themselves were just as black as she. Their "contempt for their own blackness ... their, exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness" was to blame (65). This very small scene is of great significance as Morrison uses it to demonstrate the severe and devastating effects of internalized racial attitudes and how they can consume children, the most vulnerable members of any community. Additionally, the display of the children partaking in mean and sadistic behaviors is Morrison's way of showing how this problem is not being solved, but rather it is generational and cyclical.

In a similar situation, Pecola suffers humiliation from a young boy named Junior and his mother Geraldine. Morrison uses these two characters to further her critique of racism as well as introduce the effects of classism. While Pecola and her family represent black poverty, Geraldine and her son are reflective of "brown" people who "live in quiet black neighborhoods

where everyone is gainfully employed” (Morrison 82). Geraldine and her son become symbolic of the “members of the black community who have given into the middle-class values of the dominant culture” (Mahaffey 159). Taught “the careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners,” Geraldine works to “get rid of the funkiness of nature,” which means to destroy all parts of herself that are considered too black to be acceptable to white, mainstream society (Morrison 83). Morrison comments on the importance of the negative effects of internalized racism and its generational effects through the characterization of Junior, who has been taught he should play “with white kids [because] his mother did not like him to play with niggers” (87).

As in the aforementioned examples, Pecola cannot successfully navigate through these socially crippling exchanges with adults and peers because of her mother. Pauline’s severe melancholy is linked to her “parenting difficulties, including [her] negative-hostile interactions” (Brennan, Hammen, & Katz 87). Pauline is very aware of her issues with anger and admits she was “bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught [her children] fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, [and] fear of madness like Cholly’s mother’s ... into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life (Morrison 128). Turning her fear into violence was one way to deal with the trauma Pauline suffered. Pecola is doomed to continue this cycle of trauma. However, with a new generation, the trauma or melancholy from the Pauline’s generation does not manifest itself through violence. Instead, Pecola displays her melancholy through silence which allows her to transcend her physical worlds of oppression, racism, classism, and abuse, turning within herself to cope.

Through the motifs of invisibility and silence, Pecola’s endless cycle of melancholia becomes evident and fuels her unrealistic and self-destructive desire for blue eyes.

In Anne Cheng's exploration of racial melancholia and hidden grief, she argues:

It is precisely the slippery distance between loss and exclusion that racial myopia effects. Part of the central dilemma of dominant racial melancholia –since its authority is constituted, sustained, and made productive by this system of suspended other – is that it does not really want the lost other to return. (16)

In this regard, Cheng is proposing that melancholia demands individuals to see themselves as a configuration of two parts, the self and the other. It is the other or nonwhite side of the melancholic that must remain invisible. Morrison uses the motif of invisibility to illustrate Pecola's descent into extreme depression. Pecola's wish to become nonexistent stems from the abuse she faces at home. For example, when her parents are fighting, she explains she has "a profound wish that she herself would die" (Morrison 43). She also expresses her wish to disappear and explains how during her parents' fights, she wills herself invisible by praying to God for help as she imagines her whole body disappearing (44-45). Unfortunately, Pecola is never fully successful because she explains that her eyes always remain (45). The eyes become the symbol for her melancholia as Pecola believes a set of pretty, blue eyes would allow her to see the world in a different way, as well as allow the world to see her a different way—carved out of the image of a little white girl.

In addition to invisibility, Pecola's melancholia is displayed through her silence. Morrison captures this by allowing Pecola's story to be narrated by someone else. The fragility of Pecola's character is offset by her only friends, Claudia and Frieda MacTeer. It is through Claudia's character that Pecola finds a voice capable of stepping in and verbalizing the racial crime and injury Claudia has witnessed.

The strength in Claudia's character comes from her ability to filter and sift through the norms of the dominant, white culture without internalizing all of its negative effects. Claudia's ability to resist racial melancholia and continue through a successful mourning process can be attributed to her own mother, who is the opposite of Mrs. Breedlove. While Mrs. Breedlove ignores her own daughter, Mrs. MacTeer is characterized as a caring, loving mother who always seems to have her girls' best interest at heart. Even though Mrs. MacTeer is written as either ranting out loud, scolding her daughters, or singing the blues, her behavior is never detrimental to her daughters' development. Rather, her actions work just the opposite and seem to be performed out of love. For instance, she complains about having to give charity but welcomes both Pecola and Mr. Washington into her home. Also, she badgers Claudia and Frieda about the little things but makes sure they are well taken care of. Recalling memories of her mother, Claudia explains how autumn, a season usually associated with decay, is a time when she "think[s] of somebody with hands who does not want [her] to die" (Morrison 12). Further, she tells readers there was "love thick and dark as Alaga Syrup, [that] eased up" through cracks within their house (12). Mrs. MacTeer is a dynamic character that shows her daughters a range of emotions, while Mrs. Breedlove only teaches Pecola anger, hate, and fear.

Mrs. Breedlove comes to represent the oppressed black woman/ mother while Mrs. MacTeer becomes representative of one who does not easily fall under white culture's spell of inferiority. As a result, Pauline teaches her daughter to fear her own blackness (self-loathing), and Mrs. MacTeer is able to raise a daughter who is proud of her color (self-loving). Yes, Claudia has been exposed to the same negative, racist attitudes, but she is able to sort through what Cheng calls a "web of negotiation" in order to battle the ill effects of "agency as well as abjection ... self-denigration and pride" (17). Pecola is not able to do so, thus surrendering to and

internalizing the racism. While Pecola wants to become the blue-eyed baby doll, Claudia resists white culture's hegemony by wishing to "break off the [doll's] tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around," "take off the head, shake out the sawdust, [and] crack [its] back against the brass bed rail" (Morrison 21).

At the end we are left with an awkward, babbling Pecola, a girl who has descended into madness where she finally is able to escape reality and mentally disappear: "So it was. A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (204). Besides becoming invisible to others, Pecola's silence is finally broken upon her imagined retrieval of blue eyes, and she only talks to herself. Speaking to what is presumed to be her own consciousness, Pecola is Morrison's vehicle for demonstrating how the racial injuries bestowed upon a child from her mother and community are capable of completely destroying the life and mind of an innocent child.

Pecola's skin color becomes her downfall and ugliness plagues her existence. Even though Pecola is young and maturing, she recognizes her appearance is linked to her blackness and she, modeled from her mother, has internalized the self-hatred and loathing: "Thrown, in this way, into the blinding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see the eyes of other people" (Morrison 40). The reality of what others see is the broken existences of a mother and daughter who are characterized by overwhelming feelings of a diminishing self-worth. Morrison, however, wants readers to take heed of this cautionary tale; we are not born to hurt and hate, but rather inherit those feelings from our environments and our parents.

**American Citizenship: Exploring Melancholia and Citizenship in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland***

Chapter Two

If asked to define the African American literary experience, one begins with slavery, spirituals, and the undying voices of the abolitionists who fought for freedom during one of the darkest and most brutal periods of American history-- the antebellum south. Rooted in debilitating spiritual and horrific physical realities, the stories produced during this time brought forth the clandestine tales of resilience and redemption as black Americans sought to claim themselves in a white world that had ultimately stripped them of their authentic voices. Post war, the literary voices strengthened and grew to include writers who sought to reveal the harsh realities faced by the next generation of blacks living in the rural, southern United States.

Alice Walker is such a writer who finds herself exploring themes of post war suffering through characters who, because of self-pride, pity, fear, and hate (among other emotions), find themselves emotionally isolated as they succumb to degradation and death. In her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker depicts cycles of poverty and violence through her characterization of the Copeland family, specifically that of the father (Grange) and the son (Brownfield). Both men represent the marginalized and devalued parts of society in which they become victims of a vicious cycle of oppression. Unable to reconcile differences in their identities, their loss of self is manifested through the characters' inability to define themselves and live harmoniously as successful citizens and members of society in rural, white communities

that are governed by hate and racism. Walker's novel deals with the devastation that develops within the African American male psyche when he must live and thrive in a world devoid of all his rights. By looking closely at Grange's three lives, Grange's connection to his granddaughter Ruth, and Brownfield's struggle to accept reality and his violent behavior, this chapter will use Freud's clinical observations of melancholia to examine the thoughts and actions of each character as a result of his loss of citizenship.

Beginning with Grange's first life, Walker characterizes Grange as a drunken, abusive husband and father who becomes engulfed by the nightmares of sharecropping. Grange is objectified through his relationship with his white boss, Mr. Shipley. Brownfield, Grange's son, recalls his father's reaction the first time he saw his father interact with the white man:

For when the truck came his father's face froze into an unnaturally blank mask, curious and unsettling to see. It was as if his father became stone or robot. A grim stillness settled over his eyes and he became an object, a cipher, something that moved in tense jerks if it moved at all ... Brownfield's father had no smiles about him at all. He merely froze; his movements when he had to move to place sacks on the truck were rigid as a machine's. (9)

The words "froze," "blank," "stone," "robot," "stillness," "object," and "tense," along with the simile "rigid as a machine's," create a detached tone and paints a picture of a man who is devoid of all emotion. In fact, Grange is not viewed as a man, but rather seen, even by his own son, as an object. Leniece Davis speaks to this objectification in her essay on the African American male's double consciousness and citizenship as she points out, "The practice of exclusion makes black people feel that they are not recognized as truly American. Instead, they are seen as subpersons, subjects, and not citizens" (152). As Davis suggests, Grange is viewed as less than

human and a non-citizen in his community. This dehumanization/objectification is what initiates Grange's depression and propels him into a deep state of melancholia. According to Freud, an individual loses touch with a lost love object, usually in a subconscious manner, and that loss consumes the person's subconscious to the point of melancholia (243-244). In the case of Grange, it is his loss of citizenship that fuels his melancholia.

In his study of race and citizenship, Eric Foner points out that America continues to argue over:

the boundaries of American citizenship, the rights that American citizens ought to enjoy, where the line is drawn between Americans and others, [and] who's included within the term 'American.' This debate today has taken on a rather nasty and vicious tone that has been the case at many points in our past history.

(161)

His statement clearly captures the American attitude of "us" versus "them," and the insider/outsider mentality he speaks of highlights the importance of citizenship for the American minority, such as Grange and Brownfield. While we live in a nation of universal and national rights, the Copelands exist within a community which deprives them of these rights—their citizenship. For the purposes of this examination of Walker's text, the term citizen does need clarification. When discussing African American men such as Grange and Brownfield, legal citizenship is not in question. Yet, it is their sociocultural citizenship that is in debate, for these men are not treated as equal members within the political, economic, and social platforms of their white, hegemonic environments.

Walker uses Grange's environment, specifically his land and house, to illustrate for readers the onset of his melancholia during his first life. In a time when economic prosperity

was synonymous with the acquisition of land, Grange had none. In fact, he spent his entire life working “for a cracker and that cracker owned him” (Walker 4). With “eyes [filled with] dispassionate vacancy and sadness,” Grange “seemed devoid of any emotion” (15) as he described his house as merely:

a cabin of two rooms with a brick chimney at one end. The roof was rotting gray wood shingles, the sides of the house were gray vertical slabs; the whole aspect of the house was gray. It was lower in the middle than at its ends, and resembled a swaybacked animal turned out to pasture. A stone-based well sat functionally in the middle of the yard, its mossy wooden bucket dangling above it from some rusty chain and frazzled lengths of rope. Where water was dashed behind the well, wild morning-glories bloomed, their tendrils reaching as far as the woodpile, which was a litter of tree trunks, slivers of carcass bones deposited by the dog and discarded braces and bits that had pained the jaws and teeth of many a hard-driven mule. (14-15)

Descriptive words such as “rotting,” “gray,” “stone-based,” “turned out,” “rusty,” and “frazzled,” paired with images of death in the “slivers of carcass bones” and “discarded braces and bits,” work to show the poor and destitute conditions Grange and his family must endure. Also, the image of the animal “turned out to pasture” becomes representative of how Grange feels abandoned and rejected by society. Like the animal, he has life, but his usefulness is not acknowledged. In addition, the colors and images used mimic Grange's stagnant existence, which is symbolic of his emotional death. Upon examining his house, Grange “saw nothing about the house he could change and would therefore give up gesturing about it and he would never again think of repairing it” (15). With a “fatal shrug,” Grange relinquishes all hope of changing his

economic status by improving his land and home; thus, he forfeits his rights to obtain economic equality (citizenship) in his rural, southern community. In doing so, Grange spirals into a cycle of melancholia that is characterized by helplessness and hopelessness.

Another way in which Walker depicts Grange's melancholic disposition in his first life is through his voice, which is marked by his "usual silence" (Walker 9). Walker uses this motif of silence to capture Grange's desolation and self-loathing attitude, which Freud suggests is the undeniable outcome of the individual who "finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment" (243). Further, Freud argues that a melancholic individual can be distinguished from one who is simply mourning a loss by the "turning away from reality" (243). Grange's voice can be viewed as a link between him and the outside world. Silencing that voice becomes symbolic of his disengagement from reality. Living in a place where there is "familiar silence around him," Grange and his family saw many days pass "sometimes without a sound and the sky seemed a round blue muffler made of wool" (6). The "flats of southern Georgia" were filled with "long periods of uninterrupted quiet" (6), along with the "generally silent" (8) cotton fields. Even in conversation on the fields, the sounds of the workers turned into a "buzz" that "became part of the silence" (8). As Grange's mental state deteriorates further, he becomes "morose, sullen, reserved, ... [and] merely quiet," while all his responses were "mutter[s] or sigh[s]" (13). At the end of Grange's first life, he has lost all power of his voice and begins to answer all of life's important questions with a shrug: "He merely shrugged, never saying a word ... again. After each shrug he was more silent than before, as if each of the shrugs cut him off from one more topic of conversation" (16). It is in this silence that Grange showcases his descent into complete melancholia. Without a voice he cannot stand up to his oppressor. Like the previous shrug mentioned in response to repairing his house, he gives up

his chances of gaining social equality; thus, he gives up on any opportunity he has for achieving his citizenship.

Because of Grange's lack of stability within his home /environment and his absent voice, his character is consumed by feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. As a result, Grange becomes trapped in a "cycle" of violence and pain that "depended almost totally on [his] moods" (13). In hopes of discovering or claiming parts of his lost love object – citizenship – Grange flees north out of necessity. Yet, the melancholia Grange has fallen victim to becomes inescapable, and the solution is not as simple as running away and finding new environments and/or a new voice. To capture this idea, Walker incorporates the contrast between North and South to show how a change in environment fails to provide an easy solution.

Once Grange arrives North and begins his second life, he realizes that it is not paved with "golden streets" (192). While he hoped to escape the confines of the South, he quickly understands the North does not even see him, as he claims, "The South made him miserable ..." but "the North put him in solitary confinement where he had to manufacture his own hostile stares in order to see himself" (192). Feeling invisible, Grange unfortunately comes to understand the promise and hope of the North to be an illusion. In his exploration of mobility in African American texts, Robert Butler suggests that the North is not a physical space, but rather "a state of human liberation" (66). Yet, Grange does not find a sense of freedom or escape. Instead, he explains that each day he had to repeat his name to himself to "shut out the silence" of being ignored and feeling nonexistent (Walker 192). Ultimately, he found the same silence in the North that had governed and shaped his whole life in the South. Soon Grange finds his heart and mind consumed with hate and is reduced to wandering the streets of Harlem yelling, "Teach them to hate!" (202) He wanted the black community of the North to realize that "loving their

white neighbors in the North as in the South got them nothing but more broken heads and contemptuous children” (203). In his second life, Grange still lives a life consumed by hate.

Yet, this marks a turning point for Grange’s character. He realizes his citizenship does not exist anywhere, and he feels the urge to travel back to the South. This urge or revelation is part of acknowledging his lost love object. Freudian melancholia proposes that to successfully mourn and end melancholia, one must acknowledge the loss of the love object. For minorities, such as Grange, melancholia is formed by being denied access to a world where they fit in as social, economic, and political equals. To acknowledge the loss, then, would require the melancholic minority to change his reality. When Grange’s attempt (moving north) does not yield positive results, he is able to acknowledge his loss by recognizing the change does not need to come from the external environment. Instead, the change must come from within. He understands that he cannot change the thoughts and feelings of his oppressor, but he can change the way he chooses to deal with that oppression. Grange finds himself traveling back to the South in hopes of salvaging what is left of his sense of self and possibly save his son, who he knows has fallen victim to the same cycle he was once subjected to. This journey back home signifies Grange's third life, in which he is able to let go of his melancholia and complete the cycle of mourning through the acquisition of his farm, his voice, and his granddaughter.

With his money, along with Josie's finances, Grange is able to buy a farm and become self-sufficient (Walker 205). Liberated by the purchase of his own place and not in debt to any Mr. Shipley's, Grange is finally able to regain a sense of pride and morale. The acquisition of his own land is the first step in Grange’s process of mourning, as it allows him to acknowledge his need to be viewed as socially and economically equal to the white men who had once before dictated the value of his existence. The act of progress with the land signifies Grange's ability to

own and work the land that had once, during his first life, owned and worked him. Also, by choosing to name him Grange, which literally means farm, Walker draws emphasis to his character's connection to land and growth. As his name suggests, the farm becomes his first step in reclaiming his sociocultural citizenship in his rural, racist community.

Along with his land, Grange's journey back south results in him learning to speak again. Harold Hellenbrand, in his discussion of the significance of speech in silence in the novel, suggests "that oral expression is basic to building both personal and communal [identities]," and Grange "is without a soul in his first life, since he is bereft of words and song." (115). This is precisely why he must reclaim his voice in his third and final life in order to counteract the invisibility and nonexistence his southern life has left him. Reclaiming his voice becomes symbolic of him reinstating his citizenship, thus making him a social equal. Within this third life, Grange's silence is broken through his ability to retell history and share stories with his granddaughter Ruth. Grange sees himself as her teacher and shares narratives which are "barbed with the insights of a man who has been constantly at odds with the law and the social structures of both white and black communities" (122). Hellenbrand notes Grange's ability to use his stories and sarcastic tones to attack the "complacent values of his culture, although he does not want Ruth to reject her blackness" (123). He wishes to teach Ruth to harbor a sense of "racial pride," thus enabling her to "be saved from self-hate and helplessness" she has witnessed since she was a child (123).

Grange and Ruth's story starts with her birth, which can be viewed as symbolic of Grange's rebirth or resurrection within the story. It is the moment when he is allowed to reenter the South and his son's life, assuming the role of husband and protector, which he had originally failed at with Margaret and his own children. As acknowledgment is key, Grange acknowledges

his own self-worth and importance by assuming a worthy position within his family, which he had completely abandoned in his first life. The relationship and connection Grange is able to cultivate with his granddaughter is what ultimately saves and helps him reestablish his sense of citizenship in the South. Reconnecting with Ruth and assuming the role of father allows him to grieve the loss of his own son from his first life as well as reinvent himself as a father figure in his third life. When Ruth first entered his life, she explains how Grange was “immensely sick at times” and “there were days of depression when he spoke of doing away with himself ... He would lie immobile on the floor, dead, and she would be drawn to him to try the magic of her hugs and kisses” (163). This showering of emotion helps to snap Grange out of his melancholic disposition and begin to live again. The hate that consumed his mind, body, and soul in his first and second lives becomes overpowered by love in his third and final life.

While Ruth's character provided Grange with the strength he needed, it can also be argued that his strength helped saved her as well. Once her mother dies, she is forced to enter her own cycle of mourning and melancholia. Yet, she does not fall victim to the melancholia. Ruth is able to successfully mourn the loss of her mother and family by navigating her period of depression with Grange's stories of “Indians, and yellow people,” a “sea and ... its waters [that] were larger than Baker County,” issues such as slavery, and foreign places like “Paris, London, [and] New York” (182). Filling her mind with his own truths and the “detailed description of black history,” Grange hoped to show Ruth that there were other ways of thinking and other possibilities for her existence (182). In this way, Grange is also able to “empower [her] with some of the strengths of black culture in the Deep South” while building within her the ability to “imagine her life in terms which transcend the South, ultimately leaving [this place] for a world which offers her new possibilities” (Butler 198). In the end, it is Ruth, because of Grange's

teaching and nurturing, who will be able to maintain her dignity in the face of human cruelty and thrive in a dehumanizing environment by “transcend[ing] the limitations which white society seeks to impose on black women (Butler 198-199).

While Grange and Ruth demonstrate what can happen when oppressed individuals break the cycles of oppression and violence, Brownfield's character illustrates the consequences of African American males unable to break free. As his name suggests, Brownfield's character shows no life or growth. In fact, his melancholia is apparent from the beginning of the novel and deepens as his story progresses. Like his father, Brownfield's melancholia can also be linked back to his loss of citizenship, evident from his ability to dream, his need to escape the South, and his abuse of Mem.

Brownfield's childhood was a time of silence, avoidance, abandonment, and violence, which created a void within his psyche. Propelled by the consciousness of a life full of depression and violence, Brownfield went in search of peace within his own mind. Dreaming was a way for him to escape the depressing life that was forced upon him. Made to listen to his parents' incessant fighting and left to care for his burdensome half-brother, Brownfield drifted into his “favorite daydream,” where there “was always snow,” “a stately mansion with cherry-red brick chimneys and matching brick porch and steps,” and “a long-chauffeur driven car” (Walker 21). Freud suggests the individual who has trouble dealing with reality often finds himself “clinging to [his lost love] object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis” (243). In the case of Brownfield, his dream of the perfect family and house, as defined by his luxury, wealth, and whiteness, becomes his way of denying his loss of citizenship and absorbing a new love object – the American Dream as defined by white America.

The dream itself becomes evidence of his descent into a state of melancholia, but it is

what he dreamed about that paints a full picture of his extreme depression. Brownfield explains that his limited visions of snow “had made a cold, sharp impression on him” (Walker 21) much like the cold, cruel white world in which he was forced to find a comfortable, warm place in. Feeling at odds in an antagonistic environment, Brownfield finds relief in his dream when he is able to find comfort and warmth with the luxury of a white, rich world. In his dream even his wife's face becomes “white and powdery to his touch” while his children's faces are “two bright spots of warmth” (22). The luxurious car and house become symbols of the American Dream that Brownfield so desperately wants to achieve. The economic prosperity, along with the love and acceptance of a family in his dream was Brownfield's way of imagining the sociocultural citizenship he was denied in reality.

After meeting his cousins and hearing about all of their riches and successes in the North, Brownfield begins to think moving there would be his only hope for one day achieving this American Dream. As his hope for one day moving North “had grown longer and more intensely real,” Brownfield explains that his obsession with his dream often “possessed him” (22). This possession is part of what propels Brownfield forward and gives him the courage to leave home. After his mother's death, Brownfield finds himself eager “to sample his new freedom” (29). In the closing scene of Part 1, Brownfield sets off on his journey north.

The scene promises hope as Walker describes him leaving in “the clearing [with] a thousand birds wildly singing [him] good luck” (29). This image connotes promise and progress for the Copeland family. The noise of the “wildly singing birds” juxtaposes the silence of his old life that was governed by depression, loss, anger, and fighting. The songs of the birds are symbolic of Brownfield breaking the cycle of silence he is used to and thus signifies his opportunity to travel north to reclaim his citizenship and follow the American Dream. Yet,

Brownfield continues to hold onto the lost object of the American Dream, which signifies his disavowal of his socioeconomic inequality. As Freud would suggest, Brownfield's melancholia is becoming pathological. His inability to acknowledge his loss, like his father, ultimately leads to harder falls and a weakness of mind.

Brownfield's psyche is broken, thus preventing his character from ever experiencing true progress. In James Butler's article "Making a Way Out of No Way: The Open Journey in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*," he argues that Brownfield's dream actually reveals a tension for Brownfield's character. His desire to find a stable life in his "home" or the South is at odds with his hope of finding a "new life" in the North (66). This tug of war between North and South cannot be avoided, however. The South leaves Brownfield in a "condition of nearly total paralysis" because he is forced to contend with the harsh realities of sharecropping (71). Theodore Mason also discusses the tension Walker creates between the North and South, but suggests she creates it through the use of "emblematic structures . . . to indicate the possibilities of black life" (298). For instance, by contrasting the images of Uncle Silas's Buick with the depressing description of the Copelands' house, Walker is "engag[ing] one of the most powerful iconographic oppositions in the Afro-American narrative tradition – the place between North and South, freedom and slavery" (298). However, Walker removes the possibility of prosperity and growth because her images of the North reveal "only the illusion of freedom" (298). Consequently, the North becomes an impossibility because Brownfield lacks the determination and drive to get there. Brownfield does not possess enough of either attribute to bring about change or success. In fact, "he no longer had, as his father had maintained, even the desire to run away from [the crackers]. He had no faith that any other place would be better" (Walker 78). This statement clearly marks, per Freud's definition, a melancholic state of mind; Brownfield

does not feel as if he has a place in society anymore. Feeling as if he could not do more or perhaps his life was not worth much more, his hopes of thriving in the North fade away and are replaced, as his internalized feelings of worthlessness coerce him to simply settle into “the slot in which he found himself” (78). Upon trying to leave the South, he finds himself “indecisive[ly] wandering” about the countryside because “he had no idea which direction he should follow to go” (39). Ultimately, he found himself “gaz[ing] at the sky and “searching” for a sign or glimmer of hope. Weeks into his journey, he ends up “abandon[ing] all hope” (39). Walker offers no alternative or escape for the black men of the South – only melancholia.

Unfortunately, Brownfield is never able to experience any type of moral awakening like his father and initiate the process of mourning. Instead, Walker positions Brownfield as the self-pitied victim who is doomed to remain in the South and follow in the footsteps of his father’s first life. While Grange realized he had to take responsibility for his own transformation and awaken from melancholia, Brownfield does not acknowledge his lost object. Brownfield never expresses the desire to change, forgive, or take on responsibility. For instance, at the end of the book, when Grange argues with his son to admit his guilt and set his soul free, Brownfield claims, “[white folks] is the cause of all the dirt we have to swallow,” (263) and declares, “I ain’t about to let the crackers off the hook for what they done to my life!” (265) While Brownfield’s character does not demonstrate the productivity of melancholia, as Eng and Han suggest, his blame does bring about an important issue of America’s involvement in melancholia. Unlike Freud, Eng and Han’s theory highlights the fact that America itself suffers from melancholia, as it mourns the loss of white purity. In this case, Brownfield’s need to blame American society for the mental and emotional anguish he suffers is justifiable. However, he makes a personal choice, unlike Grange, to hold onto that hate and anger to the point of consumption. The blame

ultimately ends up eating away at him to the point of no return.

Needing to feel socially valued and loved, Brownfield clings to Mem's character, as her love replaces his lost love object of citizenship/American Dream. He was captivated by her plump physique (symbolic of the overindulgence and life of excess he wished he lived) and her language (representative of a way to shatter the silence he grew up surrounded by). Since his venture north failed, creating a bond of love with her was a way to bring new meaning to his life. Unfortunately, Mem's love saves him, but it is not enough to sustain him. After a short time married, Brownfield claims his dreams "died early," and "depression" gave way to a "submissive, accepting wife" (73).

Feeling the weight of failure, Brownfield realizes that his life is taking on the pattern of his father when he begins working for a white sharecropper. Being "emasculated" by the sharecropping industry and left to feel both "intellectually and professionally unproductive," Brownfield must use his physical presence to assert his power (Bates 64). For the remainder of Walker's novel, Brownfield's melancholia takes over and manifests itself through his violence and abusive behaviors towards his wife, specifically his attack on her intellect.

Brownfield's extreme melancholia is evident by his misplacement of the rage he harbors for white society. For instance, "it was his rage at himself, and his life and his world that made him beat [Mem] for an imaginary attraction she aroused in other men, crackers, although she was no party to any of it" (73). Clearly, Brownfield's morality is shattered and melancholia has taken over; he does not care for the truth – only some form of revenge, no matter what the cost to himself or his family. Yet, it is not her ability to attract white men that sets his anger in full motion. Mem's knowledge and ability to read and write were significant sources of his melancholia. Throughout the text, Mem's education and knowledge are highlighted through her

use of language and speech. Harold Hellenbrand acknowledges this significant link between Mem's language and Brownfield's violence in his essay "Speech after Silence: Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*," as he suggests Brownfield is attracted to Mem because her language "is love and Mem incarnates both love and language – singing to him while cooking and when getting ready for bed, and bringing water to him in the field" (116). In turn, his relationship, at first, provided a way for him to break the cycle of melancholia because Mem represented a language and a love he never got from his own parents.

As time progresses, Mem's ability to speak an educated language became a thorn in Brownfield's ego. He believed her speech and knowledge linked her to the white world he hated, and he claimed these two things "put her closer, in power, to *them* than he could ever be" (Walker 73). He believed "her knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write" (73). In turn, her knowledge and skill of language became an insult and fueled his "crushed pride and battered ego" (73). The sense of powerlessness created by her education was only relieved by his ability to reinvent himself as a man. Part of that reinvention involved going back to Josie's whore house and continuing to sleep with her despite the hurt and pain it caused his wife and family. The other part of reinventing himself and repairing his pride and ego involved him taking his "failures" and "imprinting [them] on [Mem's] face" (74). He did not want to silence Mem, but rather sought to remove the education from her voice and make her "talk like what she was, a hopeless nigger woman who got her ass beat every Saturday night" (74).

Brownfield felt so injured by Mem's intellect because he saw it as a link to the white society that had imprisoned his soul and destroyed his life. Seeing her language as a connection to "his white oppressors," Brownfield sought to destroy her speech (Hellenbrand 116).

Therefore, destroying the way she successfully communicated with the world that had destroyed him becomes symbolic of Brownfield's ability to retaliate for his bruised existence and destroy the white race. Eventually, Brownfield is successful and leaves his wife with the “love beaten out of her language (Hellenbrand 116). Brownfield reduces Mem from a once well-spoken, capable woman to a “tongue broken” (Walker 75) “verbal cripple” (Hellenbrand 116). In the end, her words come out “fat and ugly, like [they are spoken from] a tongue broken and trying to mend itself from desperation” (Walker 75).

Freud’s model of melancholia offers insight as to why Brownfield feels compelled to take for granted the love he has for his wife (his lost love object) and physically and emotionally abuse her. Freud suggests the melancholic individual becomes overwhelmed with feeling of both love and hate, which leads the patient through periods of uncertainty. Further, he argues that this ambivalence results in “conflict” where “hate comes into operation” and allows the individual to abuse, debase, and torture the object of love, resulting in “trends of sadism and hate” (250). Unfortunately, Brownfield takes his sadism and melancholia to the extreme by killing his wife. Her death becomes symbolic of all the love dying within Brownfield and his melancholia continues. He does not acknowledge the loss of this love; instead, he waits in prison planning to one day get out and reassert the same love and hate onto his daughter Ruth. While Grange has changed, Brownfield hopes to repeat the same sadistic pattern of melancholia.

Walker's *Third Life of Grange Copeland* is able to answer many questions about the ways in which an individual deals with and copes within a society that he or she feels at odds against. Grange and Brownfield both represent the marginalized African American males of society, who are oppressed by their racist, white communities. In turn, we see them oppressing themselves and their own families as a form of retaliation. This state of nonexistence or non-citizenship is what

leads these characters into a world of melancholia and degradation. With Brownfield's character, readers can see what happens when oppression and internalized racism gets the best of the individual. In contrast, Walker shows readers, through the depiction of Grange's character and his relationship with his granddaughter, how an individual can overcome such oppression. Feeling as if one does not belong cannot be an excuse for failure; instead, it must be a catalyst for a journey to self-discovery and change.

## **The Immigrant's Tale: Identities Built on Loss in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone***

### Chapter Three

From the past to present, America has always been a symbol for discovery and freedom with a history full of stories that seethe pride, independence, and opportunity for all. What many seem to forget is that the story of immigration is the story of America. As many individuals continue to see America as racialized into White America and Black America, it is important for us to take time to discover and absorb the stories of other Americans that complete our national narrative.

Hoping to take advantage of what Gold Mountain had to offer, and seeing it as a safe haven, many Chinese immigrants came to America to work with hopes of returning to their homes wiser, richer, and better prepared to take care of their family's needs. However, once they arrived, they found their hopes and dreams deferred. Facing hardships and new realities of exclusion and racism, many Asian immigrants found themselves physically, emotionally, spiritually, and culturally drained (Hilstrom 31-34).

Saying goodbye to everything a person has ever known – friends, family, and places near and dear to the heart – forges devastated immigrant identities based on loss and separation. Unfortunately, after arriving to the United States, many minority immigrants are left with one major, life-altering decision: Do I fully assimilate to American culture, forgetting my old world customs and traditions, or do I attempt to find a balance between the old and new worlds through

the process of acculturation? Teetering between two identities and having to reconcile the differences between them leaves individuals with a sense of loss and grief that can haunt their existence right to the core (Sawicki 52-54). Reclaiming a sense of identity and self becomes crucial to the survival of the immigrant. However, even if the individual finds a happy balance, how much of each culture must be sacrificed? Exploring this dilemma has become a focus for many scholars of ethnic studies, and it is reflected in many texts produced by past and contemporary Asian American writers, specifically Fae Myenne Ng's novel *Bone*. This chapter applies Eng and Han's revision of Freud's theory and looks at how mourning and melancholia may be productive. Through the development of the parents, Leon and Mah, as well as the daughters, Leila and Ona, readers witness immigrants' struggles to cope with the cultural adversities they face. In this way, *Bone* develops a story that is reflective of an immigrant's double loss of self and the American Dream.

According to Eng and Han, the conditions of mourning and melancholia are not to be separated; instead, they must be thought of as partners that "coexist" and create a conflicted rather than damaged identity that is in need of negotiation (363). Given this insight, the characters must be read as encompassing both conditions at once, but in a productive, meaningful way, as the use of the word "*conflict*" over "*damage*" suggests the psyche is in turmoil rather than destruction (363).

Eng and Han suggest that mourning and melancholia are conditions that rest in the "gap[s]" or empty spaces within the psyche of individuals who are part of groups that are forced to assimilate (352). Yet, melancholia is more than just "a loss of whiteness" (352). In fact, it crosses from parents to children and becomes an intergenerational concept built on double losses, which may include the loss of the American Dream (352-358). Ng explores this concept in depth

through the development of the parents, Leon and Mah, who find themselves in a process of mourning, as they struggle to assimilate, and a condition of melancholia, as they refuse to be fully Americanized.

Leon and Mah's immigration story can be read as an example of a traditional, first-generation immigrant story about a hardworking father and mother who have come to America, willing to make extreme sacrifices in search for their piece of the American Pie. Mah sweats life away, spending more time at a factory in a position of servitude than at home and with her girls. Likewise, we learn of Leon's voyages to sea, in which he is chasing part of the dream, hoping to bring back money and success to his family. Unfortunately, together they have created "a failed family" that is not cohesive (Ng 3). The parents only hoped "the next generation would marry for love" rather than be stuck in one based on convenience instead of intimacy (33).

Throughout *Bone*, Leon's character becomes melancholic, as he finds himself unable to fully and successfully assimilate into American culture. Leon's loss of self is evident from the very beginning of his immigrant experience as he is forced to change his identity to become legal and worthy of US citizenship. Having been "coached ... on [his] paper histor[y]," Leon was eager to pass through "interrogation at Angel Island" and never again used his real, birth name (9). In America, Leon believed "paper [was] more precious than blood," so his real self was not necessary for a successful life in his new country (9). Once he enters with his new papers, the paper trail he creates in America is anything but successful:

[Leila] lifted the suitcase up on the kitchen table and opened it. The past came up: a moldy, water-damaged paper smell and a parchment texture. The letters were stacked by year and rubberbanded into decades. I only had to open the first few to know the story:

“We Don’t Want You.”

A rejection from the army: unfit.

A job rejection: unskilled.

An apartment: unavailable. (57)

Sadly, Leon’s imposed assimilation fails to work in his favor, and he is led through a life of disappointment and depression. As a means of coping, Leon told stories that made himself seem more useful to American society. In contrast, the letters he kept revealed narratives “without the humor, without hope”; “on paper [he] was not a hero” (58). The papers he kept revealed a very different reality than the one he manufactured for so many years.

Leon’s new life in America was driven by his desire to achieve the American Dream. To do so, he risked his family, his pride, and his livelihood to take jobs at sea, take jobs beneath his age and experience, and risk his family’s life savings to pursue a business venture. Upon entering the country, he and Mah were told how lucky they were because “to live in America was to have a future” (24). Yet, he kept a “going back to China fund” (6) because “twenty-five years in the land of gold and good fortune” left them with only stories of “sweatshops, the prince of the Golden Mountain turned into a toad, and three daughters: one unmarried, another who-cares-where, one dead” (24). Leon becomes fixed in a never-ending cycle of mourning and melancholia, as he enters into old age with a destroyed family, a failed career, and no official identification to prove his existence other than a suitcase of old memories that exposes a reality far different from his dreams.

As the title of the novel suggests, bones become important and take on significant meanings throughout the text. In the case of Leon’s character, bones are connected to the old-world and traditional Chinese ways of doing things. For example, it is necessary for Leon to

return Grandpa Leong's bones to China for proper burial, as Chinese tradition mandates; however, Leon never gets the opportunity to send them back. As a result, Leon considers the restless bones to be the source of all his problems in America. He assumes every negative experience or tragedy he encounters in the U.S. is punishment for failing to return the bones. Even his daughter's suicide is thought to be a repercussion of failing to adhere to Chinese burial traditions. In this way, the bones become symbolic of Leon's melancholia. He can change his flesh, but he can never change his bones. In other words, he can change his actions, but he is still Chinese and can never remove his old-world tradition. His bones, like Grandpa Leong's, will remain restless and melancholic as he continues to try and achieve the American Dream.

Like Leon, Mah's character is also symbolic of the first-generation immigrant who has difficulty coming to terms with American culture, as it blends with Chinese. Her character gives Ng a chance to show readers how, according to Eng and Han's theory, mourning and melancholia can be productive and meaningful for the individual. Like her husband, she follows the American Dream, but remains strongly connected to her Chinese values. Her connection to the sewing ladies and refusal to leave Chinatown signifies her unwillingness to fully give up her old-world ties, as she remains loyal to her roots. Throughout the novel she is constantly trying to impart these values onto her daughters, who are undergoing their own negotiations due to America's influence. Mah's trip back to China is symbolic of the productive properties of melancholia:

Mah looked great, a good ten years younger. She'd finally put on some weight, and her coloring came back, a glow. She wore her makeup like she did in the old days, her Tommie Hom look, matchstick eyebrows and high-tone rouge and red lipstick. Mason told her she looked good and she beamed, kissing him, patting his arm. (98)

Her trip demonstrates the necessity for melancholia, as Eng and Han define it. The connection and personal engagement with the Chinese part of her identity helps to replenish her soul. Upon returning to the U.S., Mah continues her melancholia, but not in a pathological way. In fact, her melancholia (refusal to let go of Chinese customs) helps sustain her presence in America.

Along with the productive properties of Mah's mourning and melancholia, Leon's anger towards America demonstrates how the novel follows Eng and Han's theory of racial melancholia. Realizing his dreams were not coming true, Leon enacts his melancholia by acknowledging his suffering and its source:

Finally he blamed all of America for making big promises and breaking every one. Where was the good job he'd heard about as a young man? Where was the successful businesses? He'd kept his end of the bargain: he'd worked hard. Two jobs, three. Day and night. Overtime. Assistant laundry presser. Prep cook.

Busboy. Waiter. Porter. But where was his happiness? "America," he ranted, "this lie of a country!" (103)

According to Eng and Han, this blame is rightly placed, as they suggest mourning and melancholia draw emphasis away from an individual's contributions and suggest it is a social condition that stems from America's failure to accept Asian Americans as equal (345-346). Eng and Han suggest that America's failure to recognize immigrants' contributions and racial inequality results in a "national haunting," whereby America is the one who suffers from melancholia because of its inability to successfully mourn its loss of whiteness (347).

This revised theory of mourning and melancholia locates melancholia not only within the ethnic minority but also in the U.S. nation, which fails to acknowledge the contributions of Chinese Americans to U.S. history and society. Assimilationist ideology requires immigrants to cut ties

with their past cultures and communities in order to blend into mainstream American society. An ethnic minority's melancholia serves to justify the retention of ethnic past, whereas locating the melancholia in the U.S. nation, shifts the pathology from ethnic minorities to the larger U.S. society, which seeks to promote its whiteness and ethnic purity. Looking at immigration and the process of assimilation from this perspective, the individual suffering from a loss is not the pathological entity; rather, it is America.

The melancholic characters Leon and Mah represent the harsh realities of first-generation immigrants, while the daughters, specifically Leila's life and Ona's death, demonstrates for readers how melancholia can be transmitted to the second generation. Eng and Han contend that melancholia is inherited as the offspring of immigrants are forced to "repay" for the sacrifices of their parents by "repeating and perpetuating its melancholic logic—by berating and sacrificing themselves" (354). Given this insight, racial melancholia can be defined as a suspended state of confusion that the immigrant feels as he or she teeters between the old world and the new world. To be fully successful, the "adaptation processes [must] involve the simultaneous yet gradual depositioning and repositioning of life worlds as one detaches from a previous way of life and adjusts to living in the new cultural context" ("Acculturation" 2). To survive, then, means the immigrant must strike a balance between the two cultures, finding a way to happily live on both sides of the hyphen.

We see this racial limbo very clearly through the development of Leila's character. Leila's narration reveals the second generation's perspective and exposes the gap shared between parent and child. Leila, being the oldest, is held to higher expectations and is trusted with the responsibility for herself, her sisters, and her parents' old world traditions. With parents who "don't want to come into [her] world," Leila is forced to "live in their world" (Ng 33). This grim

reality haunts Leila and creates an identity crisis in which she constantly feels like she is negotiating between two worlds. Even Nina, Leila's younger sister, knows Leila is "waiting and doing things their [parent's] way" (33) because she is "locked into living Mah's and Leon's lives for them" (112). Nina is pointing out Leila's need to hold on to tradition to please her parents. For Leila, Mah, Leon, Chinatown, and Salmon Alley come to represent the old-world /Chinese traditions that Leila feels she must escape. Her refuge becomes Mason and the Mission, symbolic of the new ways of American life she endorses. Leila knows she wants to live with Mason and marry him; however, she stays behind for so many years because she "didn't know how Mah would take it" (184). This is a clear example of how she is capable of making responsible, adult decisions for herself, yet she continues to let her mother and her loyalty to old world traditions dictate her life.

Yet, it is her inability to self-identify and become settled in each culture that leads to her melancholia. From an early age, she recalls her parents' discipline and lifestyle as "chop suey" because "there were nights they had to speak Chinese at the dinner table and there were other nights we could laugh and talk English all we wanted" (110). As an adult, Leila is constantly reminded not to be too American by her mother, who tells her things like "Don't eat American every day .... It's not good for you" (48). While she appreciates her mother's advice and knows that women of her old world /Chinese culture should be respected for their abilities to use "all necessary rituals to get through [the] hard time[s]" (103), Leila cannot find it within herself to take a stand in front of her parents by admitting she wants to leave them in Chinatown and move away to start her own life even though "[her] tastes have changed, like everything else" (48).

Throughout the novel, Leila subverts the "stereotype of the dutiful, submissive Chinese daughter," and we see hints throughout the text of her becoming too Americanized (Gee 130).

Allen Gee suggests that Leila's conflict with her parents as immigrants and herself as a second-generation, American-born individual is most evident through the judgments she makes about others in her community. First, he points out Leila's expressed discontent towards her stepfather's friends:

Leila characterizes the old men with whom Leon, her stepfather, associates at Portsmouth Square. They are called "time wasters" (7), "scraps of dark remnant fabric" (8), "fleabag friends" (9), "Chinatown drift-about" (13), and "talkers, wanderers, and time-wasters" (142). What Leila is doing is constructing the old men as Other. She makes judgments about all of the men simply based on their appearance and dehumanizes or devalues the way they live simply because they do not meet her standard of masculine decency. (Gee 131)

Leila's perceptions construct these men of her Chinatown community as "Other" and suggest that she displays the effects of being tainted with views of America's white supremacy. Leila's morals and values, while rooted in her old world traditions, have become manipulated "according to an American standard of work or ideal of success" (Gee 132). Another example which displays Leila's "American sensibility" is when she reveals to readers the details surrounding her job as an interpreter for Chinese immigrant families (132). One would assume Leila would feel honored and/or humbled by such a touching experience. Yet, as Gee points out, Leila ends up feeling like a "missionary" (Ng 16) who is ultimately depressed by some of the living conditions she is forced to endure as part of her work (Gee 132). Both examples noted in Gee's argument suggest that Leila has a low tolerance for immigrant poverty, which results from a learned American arrogance.

However, there are times when being too American or white does seem to bother Leila. For example, when she meets Mason's cousin Dale, she is not initially put off by his speech, which Mason swears "sounds so white" (Ng 43). Nevertheless, as she looks at Dale's American success evidenced by "his house, his business, and even his smooth English," she admits she "could never go with a guy like him" (43). Even though she feels comfortable and accepting of white culture, there is a part of her that holds back and is only nourished by her original roots. Further, when picking up her sister Nina from the airport, she expresses disgust towards Nina's red clothing. Because her family is in the process of mourning, Leila knows the color will offend her mother. In this instance, she does not see her sister as fulfilling the dutiful role of the responsible Chinese daughter, and it bothers her. While it seems okay to be American at times, there are certain things that even she considers to be crossing her cultural lines. Her ambivalence stems from the fact that Leila is able to recognize that she and her sisters are from "the lucky generation" who reap the benefits of parents who "forced themselves to live through the humiliation in this country so that [they] could have it better" (36).

In addition to Leila's thoughts and actions, a distinct narrative structure and sequence of events in *Bone* highlight and mimic Leila's melancholic disposition. For instance, *Bone's* narrative structure takes on the characteristics of a detective story. The detective structure itself reflects the melancholic state of mind as it is a story of an individual searching for clues, concocting scenarios, and seeking answers, like the melancholic who is at odds with his or her past and is in constant search for reconciliation. *Bone* follows a similar structural pattern as it features a young, second-generation immigrant, Leila, who is like a detective searching for the unknown facts surrounding the death/suicide of her sister Ona.

Also, Ng alters the plot structure by reversing the order of events, which creates a tug of war between the past and present. Putting the ending first, Ng works back through family secrets and relationships to reveal Leila's story, along with Ona's story. By reversing the order of events, Ng is able to reinforce the detective structure and place Ona's suicide right in the middle. On the very first page Leila mentions the suicide; thus, it is posed as a centripetal force pulling in the narrator and readers alike. The force, like a spiral or loop, along with the first person narration, works throughout the story to pull the narrator and reader back and forth through the past and present, revealing just enough details to add character and suspense, but not too much as to make the story appear unrealistic and melodramatic.

Eng and Han's theory of racial melancholia argues that an individual suffering from melancholia is one who is working through the process of negotiating his or her past (old world) and the present (the new world). It is important, however, to note that this is a negotiation rather than a struggle. In this way, Eng and Han's version of melancholia can be seen as a necessary and productive process that suggests a healthy balance within the immigrant's life. According to Eng and Han, then, Leila's character represents the healthy balance, the healthy melancholic subject who refuses to give up like her sisters. Ona's literal suicide can be viewed as a devastation of mourning, for she was not able to find a balance between both cultures. Likewise, Nina, who has run away in order to fully immerse herself in an American way of life, can be viewed as a figurative suicide. Leila, who stays and negotiates her past and present, comes to signify the productive properties of melancholia that Eng and Han discuss.

In this way, the interplay between past and present signifies the healthy and productive properties of racial melancholia. In her essay on melancholy and phantoms in *Bone*, Juliana Chang suggests Leila's story is "a temporal paradigm based on the notion of the text as

palimpsest, as multilayered surface” (111). Given this insight of layered text, Ng is able to manipulate and rearrange time and details while coercing the reader to become a temporal archeologist, digging through words and discovering the many layers and truths beneath previous layers and truths, all the while hoping to discover a reason for Ona’s death. As Chang suggests, because “melancholia ... signifies an improper attachment to the past, [Leila’s back and forth narration] palimpsestically keep[s] alive what should be left behind” (115). For Chang, this backward glance seems to signify Leila’s inability to successfully mourn, while her melancholia keeps her mind trapped in the past. However, I would suggest the spiraling or looping of events and emotion, paired with the first person account, allows Leila to come to terms with her sister’s death, and understand the relationships with her other sister and parents, as well as with her lover and career. It is as if Ona’s death becomes a dividing line for Leila’s mourning and melancholia. Before the death, Leila’s depression is more pathological. After Ona’s suicide, Leila’s melancholia appears to be productive, as she is able to come to terms with her identity and make peace with herself by successfully negotiating between both cultures.

Oscillating back and forth, through the past and present, Leila’s narration puts emphasis on another important melancholic subject—Ona’s death. With the parents representing the past and the children symbolic of the future, Ona’s death signifies a break in progression, and it triggers an impending doom, a blanket of melancholia that lingers throughout the narration.

Leila tells us that Ona “had always been the forward-looking one. She was always excited about the next day, the tomorrow” (Ng 88). Given this insight, we can read Ona’s character to be a symbol of hope for the future. In this way, her death becomes a grim reality for Leila and the rest of the family as they see “the next day, the tomorrow” gone forever. Her death, then, becomes symbolic of the dying of the future, the American Dream. This realization places

Leila at a similar loss to that of her stepfather. Like Leon, Leila now is susceptible to the double loss of self and the American Dream.

Donald Goellnicht speaks to this connection in his article “Of Bones and Suicide: Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*.” He suggests, because Ona is so closely characterized as being so similar to her father and possessing “the blood of her mother and the bones of her father,” she comes to represent both the Chinese family and the American Dream (319). He argues that the death of Ona is Ng’s way of exploring how “the dream dissolves” quickly for immigrants as Ona’s character becomes “the embodiment of [her parent’s] American dream turned nightmare” (319). Not only does her death suggest their dreams are dead, it also suggests the family as a cohesive unit is destroyed. Read this way, Ona’s physical death can be seen as a mirror to the emotional death Leon faces as he must find a way to commit his own suicide, killing off the parts of the old world while adopting and owning habits and ways of life from his new world, in hopes of successfully assimilating and ensuring the prosperity for the family.

Another way to view Ona’s death is to examine it as a technique Ng uses to explore the binaries of old world/new world and past/present, in order to draw an emphasis on Leila’s melancholia. Diane LeBlanc, in her discussion of the multiple binaries that control the novel, argues that Ona’s death becomes symbolic of the past and future, which works to split Leila’s existence (16). That is, after Ona’s death, “Leila splits her time ... between the past in Salmon Alley with Mah and the future at the Mission with Mason” (16). However, LeBlanc notes that Leila is unable to “combine [parts of herself] to create the desired wholeness of self-affirmation,” because before the death, Leila was a sister and after she only becomes the self (16). Ultimately,

Leila's "identity becomes a site of struggle between her past and her future, with no self-affirming present" (16).

We never completely understand why Ona chooses to take her life, but we surmise it is a result of not being able to fully express herself and make her own decisions. Leila reminds us more than once that she knew "Ona felt stuck. In the family, in Chinatown. Ona was the middle girl and she felt stuck in the middle of all the trouble" (Ng 139). She also "knew Ona got used to keeping everything inside" and "wanted to be equally divided about her loyalties to Mah and Leon" (112). Leila understands that her sister Ona was much like her, and she knows "Ona's need for them destroyed her" (112). Because of this, Ona's death/suicide serves as an example to Leila of the consequences of a person losing the freedom to be him or herself and develop his or her own sense of identity and self. Leila is unable to find an exact reason and is left with only unanswered questions and what ifs. As a result of not ever knowing the root cause, Ona's death propels Leila into a state of inescapable melancholia.

Having an existence and identity based on loss is enough to cause anyone to question his or her community, culture, and self. Feeling as if one is torn between two cultures can easily send one into depression or melancholia. Answering the question of how much of each culture to sacrifice becomes the center of the immigrant's struggle and sadness, yet there is no definite answer. Giving up too little can be as harmful as giving up too much. It is through novels such as Ng's *Bone* that readers get to experience the intimate details of such conflicted existence.

## Conclusion

America's once dominant culture is slowly becoming the new minority as immigration rates continue to steadily rise and more individuals begin to take a stand in redefining what it means to be American. The melting pot mentality that once held steady is quickly transforming to a salad bowl effect as more minority groups work on redefining themselves in a variety of social, political, educational, economic, and literary arenas. Yet, it is common for individuals to resist change, for it brings uncertainty. In this case, resistance would be those individuals who are not open to the swing of the cultural pendulum. It is through this resistance that stereotypes, racism, and hate continue to breed.

Feeding my interest of African American and Asian American writers, my overarching question for my thesis became: How does white society shape the psych of the African American male and female, as well as Asian American immigrants and their children? With this focus, I selected Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* because it would allow me the opportunity to delve into the mind of both mother and daughter, while allowing me to think about both love and beauty. Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* worked as a great companion piece because it focuses on the father and son perspective while allowing me to ponder male pride and domestic violence. In terms of looking at an Asian American text, Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* worked perfectly because it captures the ill effects of the immigrant experience.

To weave my response of all three texts, I looked at the depressed words and actions of the characters and chose to read into their thoughts and behaviors using Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia, as well as Eng and Han's theory of racial melancholia as it applies to the immigrant. No specific character offered a clear and definite picture into each scholar's theory, but together, they paint a very clear picture of what it means to hate oneself and even

one's own community as a result of being ostracized and made useless by dominant, white America. In each chapter, the characters are closely examined in terms of what their lost love object is. For example, for Pauline and her daughter it is love and beauty, for Grange and his son it is the ideal of American citizenship, and for Leon and Leila it is the self and the American Dream. Yet, we should not look to the individual as if he or she has a problem that needs to be solved. In fact, you could argue that each character's sadness is a reaction to America's never-ending and perpetual state of melancholia. Instead of looking towards the minority for answers, it is rather the country that refuses to let go of the lost love object—the ideal of racial purity. In this sense, US society can be viewed as the melancholic subject that refuses to let go of its ideals of perfection (the melting pot) and accept the beauty of diversity. In effect, the failed mourning of America's white supremacy leaves each character as both the subjects of melancholia, as well as the objects of melancholia. Unfortunately, the melancholia of the repressed minority is a cycle of depression that will not change, unless Americans can let go of their white supremacist beliefs and realize these expectations are unrealistic.

## Works Cited

- “Acculturation” *The Elgar Companion to Consumer Research and Economic Psychology*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1999. Credo Reference. Web. 3 March 2014.
- Anderson, Lydia. *Immigration*. New York: Watts, 1981. Print.
- Banks, James A. “Diversity, Group Identity, and Citizenship Education in a Global Age.” *Educational Researcher* 37.3 (2008): 129-139. Web. 3 March 2014.
- Bates, Gerri. *Alice Walker: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2005. Web. 3 March 2014.
- Butler, Robert James. "Alice Walker's Vision of the South in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*." *African American Review* 27.2, Black South Issue, Part 2 of 2 (1993): 195-204. Web. 3 March 2014.
- Butler, Robert James. "Making a Way Out of no Way: The Open Journey in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*." *Black American Literature Forum* 22.1, Black Women Writers Issue (1988): 65-79. Web. 3 March 2014.
- Chang, Juliana. "Melancholic Remains: Domestic and National Secrets in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 51.1 (2005): 110-133. Project Muse. Web. 28 Jan. 2014.
- Cheng, Anne A. *The Melancholy of Race*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Davis, Leniece T. "Stranger in Mine Own House: Double-Consciousness and American Citizenship." *The National Political Science Review* (2005): 147-161. Web. 3 Feb. 2014.

- Delcoco-Fridley, Lea. "Defining Motherhood: The Plight of the Non-Traditional Mother in Multi-Ethnic American Women's Literature." Diss. University of Pennsylvania, 2011. *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT)*. Web. 3 Feb. 2014.
- Eng, David, and Shinhee Han. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The International Journal of Relational Perspectives* 10.4 (2008): 667-700. Web. 28 Jan. 2014.
- Eyerman, Ron. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of the African American Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Foner, Eric. "Race and Citizenship." *Socialism and Democracy* 17.1 (2003): 161-173. Web. 28 Jan. 2014.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." 1917. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*. Ed. James Strachey et al. Trans. James Strachey. Volume XIV. London, Hogarth Press: Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953-1974. 237-258. Print.
- Gee, Allen. "Deconstructing a Narrative Hierarchy: Leila Leong's "I" in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*." *MELUS* 29.2, *Elusive Illusions: Art and Reality* (2004): 129-40. Web. 3 Feb. 2014.
- Ghasemi, Parvin, and Rasool Hajizadeh. "Demystifying the Myth of Motherhood: Toni Morrison's Revision of African-American Mother Stereotypes." *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 2.6 (2013): 477-479. Web. 28 Jan. 2014.
- Goellnicht, Donald C. "Of Bones and Suicide: Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.2 (2000): 300-30. Web. 2 March 2014.
- Hellenbrand, Harold. "Speech, After Silence: Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*." *Black American Literature Forum* 20.1/2 (1986): 113-28. Web. 3 Feb. 2014.

- Hillstrom, Kevin. *The Dream of America: Immigration, 1870-1920*. Detroit, Mich.: Omnigraphics, 2009. Print.
- Katz, Shaina J., Constance L. Hammen, and Patricia A. Brennan. "Maternal Depression and The Intergenerational Transmission of Relational Impairment." *Journal of Family Psychology* 27.1 (2013): 86-95. *PsycARTICLES*. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.
- LeBlanc, Diane C. "Neologism as Oppositional Language in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 54.1 (2000): 11-22. Web. 24 March 2014.
- Mahaffey, Paul Douglas. "The Adolescent Complexities of Race, Gender, and Class in Toni Morrisons *The Bluest Eye*." *Race, Gender & Class* 11.4 (2004): 155. *Ethnic NewsWatch*. Web. 28 Jan. 2014.
- Mason, Theodore O. Jr. "Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*: The Dynamics of Enclosure." *Callaloo* 39 (1989): 297-309. Web. 3 Feb. 2014.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. 1970. New York: Vintage-Random, 2007. Print.
- Ng, Fae Myenne. *Bone*. 1993. New York: Hyperion, 2008. Print.
- Saunders, James Robert. "Why Losing A Tooth Matters: Shirley Jackson's "The Tooth" and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*." *Midwest Quarterly* 53.2 (2012): 193. *MasterFILE Complete*. Web. 28 Jan. 2014.
- Sawicki, Wanda. "We Are Not Like Other People: Identity Loss and Reconstruction Following Migration." *Counting Our Losses: Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 151-161. Print.
- Takaki, Ronald T. *From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987. Print.

Tatum, Beverly D. *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?": And Other Conversations About Race.*" New York: Basic Books, 2003. Print.

Walker, Alice. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland.* 1970. Reprint. First Harvest Ed: Harcourt, Inc., 2003. Print.