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Vivian L. Huang
New York University

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PILING UP, OR FLOATING AWAY

Vivian L. Huang

The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy by David L. Eng.
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Pp. 198. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.

David L. Eng's latest book project urges readers to ask what it means to be accounted for. In the company of Eng's previous publications, including *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001) and the anthology *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2003), the latter co-edited with David Kazanjian, *The Feeling of Kinship* curates a space in which the shared and perhaps disavowed investments of disciplines such as Asian American studies, psychoanalysis, diaspora studies, and queer theory meet in provocative tension. For Eng, psychic, historical, and political arrangements condition the affective terms of belonging. And so it is that *The Feeling of Kinship* lingers on the effects of a repressed national psyche with renewed concern for affective responsibility.

Eng's book critiques the costly legacies of historical amnesia operative in the United States. *The Feeling of Kinship* engages with the remaining uses of the nation by re-investing in the transnational foundations and buttresses of the United States as we know it. Moreover, what Eng argues so astutely is that how we know history informs notions of self and nation. Eng reads queer migrant labor, transnational adoption, Japanese and Japanese American internment, and sexual regulation to demonstrate how reiterated acts of forgetting cannot fully negate or account for psyches resplendent with intensities of

feeling. Eng argues that membership too often requires forgetting and disavowal, resulting in the affective and psychic haunting of the nation. Throughout *The Feeling of Kinship*, Eng demonstrates how holding on to one's losses is critical to an ethical historiography. In these terms, Eng's is an investigation into which and whose histories count, and which are neglected, lost by being made lost. Eng's prose, both sharp and patient, grounds his analysis in the political salience of everyday life. An early anecdote of students "coming out" to Eng as adoptees, for example, grounds Eng's pedagogical need to account for transnational adoption.

Eng theorizes the national haunting of race and racism as endemic to the *racialization of intimacy*, a phrase he uses to describe the purchase of bourgeois intimacy and privacy under the rubric of multiculturalism and color blindness. In the spirit of scholars like José Esteban Muñoz and Jasbir K. Puar, Eng casts suspicion on the "disappearing act of race" alongside the assimilation of gays and lesbians (11). Eng remarks upon the desirable enfolding of lesbian and gay individuals into a dominant United States and terms this phenomenon *queer liberalism*. Queer liberalism reinforces the neoliberal mythos that queer politics is the next leg of the freedom relay race, with sexual minorities picking up where racial minorities

leave off. For Eng, to subscribe to such a telos is to risk denying the continued currency of race and racism in the American political arena, not to mention the historical entanglements between race and sexuality in the United States throughout time. Eng argues that, under queer liberalism, race and racism appear only as always already disappearing. This "spectrality of race" in public discourse renders race and racism as obsolete concerns uncomplicatedly retired to the "dustbin of history" (11, 40). Instead, race and racism are everywhere felt but no longer publicly grappled with. Eng proposes *queer diaspora* as a critical methodology and reading practice that challenges queer liberalism and the racialization of intimacy by shifting the frames of "race" (14). As Eng writes, the doing of queer diaspora allows an exploration of "contemporary Asian movements and migrations in the global system not through a conventional focus on racial descent, filiation, and biological traceability, but through the lens of queerness, affiliation, and social contingency" (13).

And so it is that Eng calls for a post-structuralist account of kinship, one that indexes affinities coagulated by racialized feelings that problematize an Oedipal model. The racialization of intimacy, and the question of accountability, are edified by the book's epigraph from William Wordsworth's poem "We Are Seven," in which the speaker

persistently asks for the count of the girl's brothers and sisters, two of whom have died. Eng's selection points readers toward a feeling of kinship that must repeatedly defend and assert its numbers. The girl—with a “rustic, woodland air”—in Wordsworth's poem models a certain type of accountability that is a refusal to reduce the feeling of kinship to subtractive logic, an insistence that two deceased siblings subtracted from a total of seven still amounts to seven. Moreover, the poem is a testament to the girl's acknowledged plurality: *we* are seven. In this excerpted epigraph, the dead count in an emphatically necessary way, one that the “simple child” of the poem embraces in the face of authority's challenge.

A post-structuralist account of kinship for Eng pivots on the refusal to let go. Reuniting as co-authors of “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia” (2000), Eng and practicing psychotherapist Shinhee Han further their groundbreaking essay on racial melancholia as a collective depathologized structure of feeling particularly acute for early-generation Asian Americans. Through readings of Deanne Borsay Liem's documentary *First Person Plural* (2000) and a case study of one of Han's patients, Eng and Han consider the psychic toll and material effects of transnational adoption as a particular constellation of racialized feeling. In their reading

of both cultural objects, the transnational adoptee is denied the communal aspect of racial melancholia and therefore struggles to feel like kin in her adoptive family. That is, part of the political import of racial melancholia is its sharedness. Eng and Han argue for the possibilities of therapy as a “pedagogy of racial reparation” (160), suggesting that it can unmoor, if not negotiate, psychic conflict.

Eng's literary and cinematic texts couple with classics of psychoanalysis to trouble the epistemes of race, gender, and sexuality. Though the first two chapters of Eng's book draw from the tensions between bourgeois intimacy/domesticity, race, and same-sex relations between men, most of the book turns to the question of “girl love”—a phrase borrowed from Kaja Silverman—and different tensions endemic to feelings of kinship between women. Perhaps due to his investment in psychoanalysis, Eng's readings of girl love focus on various relations between daughter and mother. It is here that Eng's critical tool of queer diaspora could go further. Eng's readings of queered kinship limit themselves by their adherence to gender norms at the risk of reinscribing woman as eternally maternal—that is, woman as always in relation to the maternal. With Judith Butler's essay question of “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” (2002), we can repose, how queer (and which

“queer”) can kinship become? Increased pressure on the differences and the possible limits of kinship, intimacy, love and indeed sexuality would open Eng’s compelling impulse for queer kinship to more possibilities, including the necessity of doing and imagining gender otherwise.

Although the lack of explicit consideration of lesbians of color, for example, is noticeable, we can read *The Feeling of Kinship* as troubling what we think we know about mother–daughter relations or Asian American girl love, or indeed, what we think we know about queerness. This marks one of Eng’s most significant contributions: he revises the “doing” of queer theory by putting pressure on the politics of belonging and caretaking instead of, as is popularly expected, sex acts. As such, Eng demonstrates how feelings of kinship continue to shift around gender, sex, and color lines. That is, Eng’s engagement with intergenerational feelings of kinship between women can be seen as a critique and complication of the affective responsibility put especially on women of color. In this way, *The Feeling of Kinship* allows for more nuanced readings of intergenerational mother–daughter focus in Asian American literature. This expectation on women of color to provide for others’ affective satisfaction, when considered with Eng and Han’s discussion of racial melancholia as an inheritable

structure of feeling, warrants the return to the maternal. Through affective orientation toward the mother, Eng reads the mother–daughter relation as accessible to a type of queer care.

To work toward creating psychic space for two (or, more aptly, other-than-one) mothers, Eng highlights Silverman’s work on girl love to argue for the resignification of lack. Such a project would involve the refusal of Freud’s prototypical girl to turn away from the mother figure—a refusal, that is, to assimilate mother and loss as one. Eng’s turn to transnational adoption is crucial here in order to highlight the need to negotiate psychic space for alternative forms of kinship. Not equating mother with loss is a way of working through histories—national and international, personal and interpersonal—without denying them, resignifying both loss and the maternal. Moreover, through his readings of Freud and transnational adoption, Eng illustrates how the racialized girl moves in particular social coordinates attuned to melancholia. And it is through social practices that she is able to negotiate the simultaneous mourning and melancholia that is racial melancholia. The structure of feeling is also how she knows differently, how she encounters the world around her with critical difference, and how, therefore, different modes of world making are open to her.

Eng powerfully argues that racial melancholia enables queer historiography through *affective correspondences*. He describes affective correspondences as those that “[carves] out a space for what-could-have-been in the now” (186). Affective correspondences

keep the past affectively alive in the present, providing a site for the reconstitution of melancholia’s social residues, by configuring affect as a tool for political disenchantment and social reform. In this way, affect becomes the site of history as a doing in futurity. It becomes a site of both individual and collective repair, of collective racial reparation. (186)

This affective terrain might be exemplified on the cover of *The Feeling of Kinship*. The two long-haired people index a new kind of beautiful picture, not necessarily one of the good-enough mother, but of acknowledged conflict, racial reparation, and affective responsibility. Artist Michele Carlson’s *Roses* (2006) features two women in dresses, one affixing a flower to the other’s temple, the other wielding a handgun and a scowl. What Eng might call “social residues” surround them: a stream of red roses hover and beside them lie piles of doll-like girls. Like a conjoined Benjaminian angel of history, the two women take stock

of the debris and tend to what has come. The cover art illustrates one embodiment of girl love, one that refuses to let go. In the words of Carlson’s epigraph, the women respond to the need to “hold it down,” where “it” is the collection within history’s dustbin (xiv).¹ Eng convincingly argues for fidelity to ghosts, a refusal to leave loss alone. The women’s refusal to let go of their objects, including each other, populates their world as “the site of history as a doing in futurity” (186). In this sense, their attendance to the past is what enables an orientation toward futurity.

Eng is a skilled docent whose writing juxtaposes archives thought disparate, confidently moving from Romantic poetry to *Lawrence v. Texas*, from a film by Wong Kar-wai to a psychoanalytic case study. We can delight in Eng’s ability to revisit and rescue the resonances of race in texts we thought we were familiar with and those that might have waved to us from outside our chosen fields. Eng’s preface, for example, cites the telling timing of both President Obama’s election and the passage of California’s Proposition 8 as symptomatic of queer liberalism. In chapter 2, “The Structure of Kinship,” Eng turns to the figure of the queer migrant laborer in Monique Truong’s 2003 novel *The Book of Salt* and Wong Kar-wai’s 1997 film *Happy Together*, arguing that the unfulfilled longing of the queer migrant protagonists indexes

the unmet promises of queer liberalism and gives evidence to other histories upon which neoliberalism and bourgeois intimacy depend. In chapter 3, “The Language of Kinship,” Eng reads *First Person Plural* alongside the John Hancock commercial “Immigration” to trouble both pieces’ neoliberal narration of transnational adoption that performs the very real desire to belong to a family uncomplicated by ongoing legacies of colonialism and gendered exploitation. Here, Eng problematizes the epistemology of Asian Americanness in an age of the “new global family,” where race is everywhere in sight yet rendered “non-visible” (97, 185). Eng draws a genealogy from US transnational adoption from Asia to gendered Asian affective labor and laborers over time, muddying the neoliberal embrace of “families we choose” to highlight how feelings of kinship are rarely warm and fuzzy.

Eng’s research itself models a queer diasporic practice, one that sprawls and crosses disciplinary fault lines with appreciation for critical difference. For what is at stake in *The Feeling of Kinship* is precisely—or better, imprecisely—what we can carry with us, and how we account for those ghosts whose presences pulsate beyond identification or linguistic assimilation.

It is a question of the stakes in asserting a *we*. Eng approaches social theory and historiography with a refreshing willingness to linger in the interstitial. Indeed, with Eng we glimpse the excitement of an interdisciplinary braiding unafraid of its fringes, one where critical engagement elicits further investment in uneasy difference. In Eng’s story of belonging and excluding within and without our national borders, we are met with the delicious rush and overwhelming task of making it count. To read alongside a scholar and writer like Eng, then, is not only a source of pleasure and inspiration. To read Eng is to attune oneself to a hopeful hunch that not-forgetting is an act of caring. Whatever our numbers, we are better for being in the company of *The Feeling of Kinship*.

Vivian L. Huang, who is at the Department of Performance Studies at New York University, is writing a dissertation on inscrutability in Asian American performance.

NOTE

1. Eng concludes his preface with this epigraph from Carlson’s *Roses*: “Everything seemed to be piling up, or floating away / But maybe those young gunners could hold it down” (xiv).