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Tamara Bransburg  
Enduring Loss: A Critique of  
Cultural Competence Literature in  
Social Work Practice with Latin  
American Immigrants

### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper I will use the concept of melancholia to critique and improve upon the theoretical constructs that are typically used in social work practice literature to understand the experience of Latin American immigrants. I will argue that acculturation and cultural competence models (re)enforce categories of self and other and reify notions of cultural authenticity that negate the complexity and specificity of immigrant experiences. In so doing, social work practice has taken up the United States' hegemonic narrative around immigration. As a challenge to this collaboration, I will propose an exploration of the concept of melancholia to inform social work practice with immigrants. My analysis will seek to trace linkages between the sociopolitical processes that engender loss and the production of immigrant identities. Through this work, I address the question: How can the concept of melancholia be applied in clinical practice with Latin American immigrants in order to critique, expand upon, and complicate the existing acculturation models for understanding immigrant identities, and the related cultural competency model for engaging in clinical work with immigrants? The purpose of this project is to improve the capacity of social work as a field to attend to the psychosocial needs of Latin American immigrants residing in the United States.

**ENDURING LOSS:  
A CRITIQUE OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE LITERATURE IN SOCIAL WORK  
PRACTICE WITH LATIN AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2012

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Wow, this was a lot of work. Thanks to everyone who helped make it possible. (In an order, but not in any particular order.) First, to Mimos for cuddling me while I wrote stuff and telling me it was ok when I procrastinated. Second, to my lovey for being a nice editor and thought-maker—Te amo. Third, to my teachers J.B. and J.B.— you are geniuses. Lastly, to my thesis advisor, Claudia, for liking this project and being supportive.

“Racial melancholia thus delineates one psychic process in which the loved object is so overwhelmingly important to and beloved by the ego that the ego is willing to preserve it even at the cost of its own self” (Eng and Han, 2000, p.695).

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

The project of history is not to reify identity but to understand its production as an ongoing process of differentiation, relentless in its repetition, but also -- and this seems to me the important political point -- subject to redefinition, resistance, and change. (Scott, 1992, p. 19)

In this paper I will use the concept of melancholia to critique and improve upon the theoretical constructs that are typically used in social work practice literature to understand the experience of Latin American immigrants. Historically, various theories of acculturation ranging from unilateral assimilation to multidimensional acculturation -- with their respective, emblematic metaphors of the 'melting pot' and the 'mixing bowl' -- have formed the basis of social work's approaches to cultural competency (Ngo, 2008). I will argue, however, that even the more sensitive acculturation models (re)enforce categories of self and other and reify notions of cultural authenticity that negate the complexity and specificity of immigrant experiences. In so doing, social work practice that utilizes cultural competence models for work with immigrants has taken up the United States' hegemonic narrative around immigration. It has unwittingly collaborated with the nation-state's political project of constructing racialized Others to increase political, social and economic power for the White, upper class.

As a challenge to this collaboration, I will propose an exploration of the concept of melancholia to inform social work practice with immigrants. I argue that melancholia allows us to consider the profound experiences of loss that characterize immigrant experience in a way that

cultural competence theories fail to make space for. Importantly, my use of the concept of melancholia locates this loss in a historical and politicized context. Finally, the concept of melancholia allows us to understand immigrant identities as ongoing social productions, and suggests that the experience of loss -- and the lost objects themselves -- become constitutive of immigrant identities. Thus, my analysis will seek to trace linkages between the sociopolitical processes that engender loss and the production of immigrant identities.

Through this work, I hope to address the question: How can the concept of melancholia be applied in clinical practice with Latin American immigrants in order to critique, expand upon, and complicate the existing acculturation models for understanding immigrant identities, and the related cultural competency model for engaging in clinical work with immigrants? The purpose of this project is to improve the capacity of social work as a field to attend to the psychosocial needs of Latin American immigrants residing in the United States. To do so, I argue, social work -- consistent with its commitment to social justice and equity -- must acknowledge and shift its historical role as a regulating force in the lives of immigrants, one which has (re)produced oppressive and racist norms in collaboration with the U.S. nation-state's nationalist and imperialist projects.

A close reading of existing social work literature on work with Latino immigrants reveals a profound neglect of the roles of historical context and relations of power (Park, 2006). This negation of the importance of economic, political, and historical processes such as colonialism, imperialism, and globalization allows for a sort of complicity with these processes. It contributes to the maintenance of a theoretical narrative whose very hegemony allows it to purport invisibility, that is, political neutrality. Theories of melancholia can provide a particularly useful antidote to these trends of obfuscation and naturalization because they demand the insinuation of



history -- of lost histories -- into the present (Eng and Kazanjian, 2003). This project then, is a melancholic one in a way, invoking the experiences, histories, and political forces that are crucial to the production of immigrant identities, but that have been lost and excluded from social work literature on work with Latino immigrants. It is my hope that by bringing other theoretical constructs into conversation with social work literature we might begin to acknowledge these relations of power, make space for suppressed narratives, and thus improve our practice with Latin American immigrants. Specifically, I hope to demonstrate through this project the usefulness of the concept of melancholia -- both as a social condition and as a framework for analysis -- for providing an articulation of the persistent role of all that has been negated, repressed, and/or lost in order to constitute what we know as “true.”

This project is intended to be useful for all social workers, but it is my hope that it will also serve as a contribution to other fields of critical theory that have incorporated and expanded upon psychodynamic literature for many years. I imagine this project as an opening, or a beginning, for a much larger conversation about how social work thinks and does its work across lines of difference. Like Rodriguez (2003), “I am more concerned with ways of looking than constructing credible objects of analysis” (p. 3). Hence my exploration of melancholia is emphatically not intended to delineate a fixed understanding of immigrant experience, but rather to serve as an invitation and an appeal for critical attention to our ways of looking at power and identity, and social work’s role in their operation.

### **Methodology: A theoretical exploration**

I have decided to explore how social work literature has imagined practice with Latin American immigrants from a theoretical perspective, rather than in an empirical fashion, because my interest is to investigate how such discourse has been (re)produced and sustained and why. In

my experience, social work literature often relies heavily on case studies, interviews, and experiential learning, all of which can be extremely helpful. But by focusing instead on the theoretical constructions that act as foundations for social work practice, I hope to draw attention to the learning projects and processes that we undergo as social workers, exploring the assumptions that undergird how we come to know rather than just evaluating what we know or ought to know. In other words, I employ a methodology that reiterates the paper's central intervention: to argue that the focus on knowledge acquisition – as the key to social work with Immigrants, on the one hand, and as the focus of social work literature on the other – can condone a negation of the role of relations of power. Focusing on the theoretical, using multidisciplinary approaches, allows us to ask fundamental questions about what is otherwise a competency-focused approach for working with immigrants. Likewise, theories of melancholia urge us to look at that which has been lost in the process of becoming, and how that loss, too, forms us. Then it is my hope that the paper's structure and approach, as much as its content, might lead us to question power's relationship to knowledge, identity and social work.

### **Biases**

As I explore the relationship between discourse and power in cultural competence social work literature, I urge the reader to also be aware of my blind spots as I utilize critical theory across disciplines. I am not an expert. As my work is grounded in post-structuralist theoretical approaches, I hold an attitude of suspicion towards “objective and universal truths” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 39) and it is imperative that the reader not engage this text in a purely absorbent way, but with a critical attention to the approaches I use. This project was very much borne of my own experience. It is representative of my own process as a queer Latina immigrant in unraveling the knowledge imposed on me about my own identities and their meanings. It is reflective, too, of

my personal encounters with therapists and service providers whose projections of “cultural competence” or “immigrant competence” onto me have left me feeling alien, objectified, and disempowered. Therefore this paper is imbued with me -- and I too am produced through the writing of this paper. It is my experience that compels and necessitates that I write this paper, but my experience is not everyone’s experience. And as I seek to weave together theories that call into question the universality of cultural competence claims and urge us to think critically about our ways of thinking, I am also clear that I am definitely not free myself of assumptions and/or biases, or of potentially universalizing my own needs, as if they also belonged to all Latino immigrants. As Rodriguez (2003) writes:

No matter how much I resist authority, I am everywhere implicated in this text. The languages I use are borrowed and flawed. They resist my intentions. Yet the words become mine. I am responsible for how I write this compilation of thoughts and ideas....[My own identities] do not authorize me to speak about others whom I know or don’t know. My experience does not authenticate me. Yet I do speak about others, clear in the knowledge that I am not speaking for them, that even if I give their words space, they are framed though a text of my creation, not their own. Still, I continue to interpret and write, always through the traces of other whispers and silences. (p. 2)

### **A Critical Theoretical Framework**

As the reader strives to draw connections between the sometimes disparate uses of theory across disciplines, it seems important to acknowledge that Poststructuralist theory has hugely impacted this work and my ways of thinking. In a succinct explanation of this approach, Sullivan (2003) writes: “Poststructuralist theorists such as Foucault argue that there is no objective and universal truth, but that particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that they engender,

become ‘naturalized’, in culturally and historically specific ways” (p. 39). In the case of this project, my hope then is to draw attention to the ways that cultural competence and multiculturalist knowledge become “naturalized,” and to what effect. Also aligned with Poststructuralist theory’s goals is my concern with “developing analyses of the differences within and between people, and the ways in which they are constructed and lived” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 40).

The use of Poststructuralist theory alongside psychodynamic theory allows for some interesting and productive uses of language and concepts. One example that figures prominently in this paper is the notion of *haunting*. Derrida (1978) pioneers the use of the notion of haunting as a way of deconstructing the opposition between two terms in a binary. He argues that binaries form a fundamental structure of logic and normative reasoning, but that the very existence of each terms in a binary depends upon its opposite, that which it renounces or excludes:

“Not only do all oppositions exist in a hierarchical relation, the limit between oppositions is constructed and perceived to be permanent and stable. However...Derrida demonstrates that the limit that separates oppositions is never stable. Derrida uses the analogy of ‘haunting’ to capture this instability: each term in an opposition “haunts” or ‘shadows’...the other term and vice versa” (Anderson, 2006).

Thus the notion of haunting resonates with melancholia’s emphasis on the constitution of the subject by that which is lost to it, that which is supposedly outside of it. Eng and Han (2003), Cheng (1997), Freud (1917), and other writers, however, consider haunting as a psychic and emotional experience – one that suggests angst, ambivalence, contamination – a persistent feeling, at the core of one’s being, of loss or emptiness that nonetheless suggests a ghostly presence. This is the presence of that which has been lost, disavowed, or prohibited, that which is

outside the self but which nonetheless (or thereby) becomes incorporated into the self as a sort of spectral presence. Hence the terms in their psychic and Poststructuralist senses contribute depth to one another: describing haunting as an individual experience underscores the psychic impact of an otherwise abstract term, while the use of the analytical notion of haunting draws attention to the role of hegemonic narratives and logics in forming individual and collective experience.

Queer theory -- which is intimately related to the objectives of Poststructuralist theory -- has also fundamentally impacted my thinking on identity production and its relationship to societal norms or “normalizing discourses” (Sullivan, 2003, p.40). Smith (1996) defines Queer as a “strategy, an attitude...Queer articulates a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality, and the family” (p. 280). Spargo (1999) adds that “Queer theory employs a number of ideas from poststructuralist theory, including Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic models of decentered, unstable identity, Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of binary conceptual and linguistic structures, and, of course, Foucault’s model of discourse, knowledge and power” (p.40). Though my focus is not necessarily on gender, sexuality or specifically queer subjects, my approach has been profoundly impacted by queer theory’s radical questioning of the role of norms in constructing and constraining the visibility and viability of certain lives, certain subjectivities.

Postcolonial theory has also contributed to my thinking in this paper. I share its goal of de-centering Western hegemonic thought and challenging notions of center and margin that are implicit and explicit in the construction of theory and articulation of history. Gandhi (1998) has defined postcolonial theory as one that “directs its critique against the cultural hegemony of European knowledges in an attempt to reassert the epistemological value and agency of the non-European world” (p. 43). Similarly, in this paper I hope to both demonstrate how Whiteness is

the implicit norm within cultural competence and multiculturalist social work literature and to work towards utilizing theories that challenge the implied relationship between difference and deficit. Foucault (1980) makes a critical intervention in postcolonial theory, drawing attention to the potential problems of merely inverting the roles of power (in this case from the colonizing to the to the colonized subject). In this paper, it is my intention to think of power in a Foucauldian way; that is, rather than propose a theory or set practice that might replace cultural competency practice for working with Latino immigrants, I instead engage with and utilize theories of melancholia to help us understand the way knowledge/power is (re)produced. I do so in the hope of creating spaces of possible queer-ing, spaces that challenge and subvert the normative (Halperin, 1995, p. 62).

Finally, I have also employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a lens and methodology in my exploration of social work literature on practice with Latino Immigrants. Park (2005) has defined CDA as a “neo-Marxist turn to the study of discourse” (p. 11), discourse being the “central modes and components of the production, maintenance, and conversely, resistance to systems of power and inequality” (p. 11-12). Inspired by Park’s (2005) use of CDA to deconstruct social work’s use of the concept of “culture”, I have attempted to utilize CDA to uncover and challenge social work’s investment in thinking about Latino immigrants’ cultures as knowable, learnable, and marked by their difference from White and/or mainstream American culture.

### **Cultural Competence, Multiculturalism, and Acculturation Theories**

In the following chapters I seek to elucidate some of the limitations and problems in social work literature dealing with practice with Latino immigrants. In this paper I move between identifying this literature as utilizing cultural competence, multiculturalist, or acculturation

theories. While these constructs are different from one another, they also have some similarities in their underlying ideologies. Consequently I have used them somewhat interchangeably for the sake of this paper, in a deliberate effort to expose the links between them, and because I am more invested in thinking about the underlying assumptions that these concepts (re)produce, than the specific content of the concepts themselves. Still I think it is important to provide a brief genealogy of these different terms and make more explicit the ways I think them to be interrelated and reinforce one another in problematic ways.

Firstly within all of these frameworks (cultural competence, multiculturalism, acculturation theory) identity is understood as “the referential sign of a fixed set of customs, practices, and meaning, an enduring heritage, a readily identifiable sociological category, a set of shared traits and/or experiences” (Scott, 1992, p. 14). Diversity then is when multiple identities encounter one another or co-exist. Ewalt, Freeman, Kirk, and Poole (1996) write that multiculturalism is a “disposition to acknowledge, appreciate, and understand cultural diversity” (xi). Fellin (2000) adds that this “definition of multiculturalism is based on the premise that U.S. society should not be characterized as having only one national culture, but rather it should be seen as having a national culture as well as many distinct cultural groups” (p.263). Crucially, these definitions have in common that they consider difference to be self-evident, rather than questioning the political origins and implications of articulations of difference. Scott (1992) writes that diversity within a multicultural framework is “seen as a condition of human existence rather than as the effect of an enunciation of difference that constitutes hierarchies and asymmetries of power” (p. 14). In other words, multiculturalism espouses a tolerance towards diversity within a depoliticized framework that fails to acknowledge the ways in which

demarcations of self and other, and center and periphery, are inevitably implicated in multiculturalist outlooks on difference.

Yan and Wong (2005) broadly define cultural competence as “an aid for communicating with and understanding clients from different cultures” (p. 182), but also speak to the difficulty of defining it with much specificity because it remains a rather abstract concept. However, after briefly reviewing the literature on cultural competence in social work and cross-cultural counseling they identify three basic tenets of cultural competence: “(a) awareness of and sensitivity to workers’ own values, biases, and power differences with their clients; (b) knowledge of the practice environment, the helping methods, and the client’s culture; and (c) skills in verbal and nonverbal communication” (Yan & Wong, 2005, p. 182). Cultural competence then can be understood as the operationalization of multiculturalism within the field of social work -- describing the different elements of culture that a clinician needs to be aware of in order to be respectful of the existent diversity of their clients. Scott (1992) has made sense of this move from the societal to the individual by articulating that “the logic of individualism has structured the approach to multiculturalism” (p. 17). She writes:

the call for tolerance of difference is framed in terms of respect for individual characteristics and attitudes; group differences are conceived categorically and not relationally, as distinct entities rather than interconnected structures or systems created through repeated processes of the enunciation of difference. (Scott, 1992, p. 17)

Mohanty (1989-90) identifies the ramifications of this individualistic conceptualization of race and culture:

there has been an erosion of the politics of collectivity through the reformulation of race and difference in individualistic terms. In other words, all politics is collapsed into the



personal, and questions of individual behaviors, attitudes, and life-styles stand in for political analysis of the social. (p. 204)

Acculturation theories have been utilized in social work literature to inform clinicians about the process that immigrants undergo in navigating the shift from their countries and identities of origin to U.S. dominant culture/identity. Berry (1998) and Berry and Sam (1997) have developed a four-fold classification of how immigrants might respond to the stress of being in a new cultural context: this includes the possibility of “assimilation,” “marginalization,” “separation,” or “integration.” “Assimilation” is meant to describe an immigrant who decides not to maintain their relationship to their culture of origin in order to more fully identify with U.S. dominant culture. “Marginalization” describes a situation wherein immigrants “lose cultural and psychological contact with both their traditional culture and the larger society” (Berry, 1998, p. 119). “Separation” describes immigrants who “place a value on holding on to their original culture” (Berry and Sam, 1997, p. 297) and seek no contact with the dominant culture. And lastly -- and most ideally according to Berry and Sam (1997) -- is “integration,” wherein immigrants strike a balance between maintaining and identifying with their culture of origin and with their host culture.

While I will elaborate further on multiculturalism, cultural competence and acculturation theories in the following chapter, my decision to group them together for the purposes of this paper is based on fundamental underlying assumptions shared by each that constitute them as three facets of a common approach to cultural difference. Firstly, all three concepts utilize a positivist definition of culture, describing identity and diversity as self-evident traits of subjects and nation-states. I will argue that such descriptions of diversity are, on the contrary, charged linguistic acts that participate in the ongoing, discursive constitution of relations of center and

periphery, constituting whiteness as normative, and “culture” as marginal. Secondly, multiculturalism, cultural competency, and acculturation theories all maintain an attitude of tolerance and/or celebration towards “culture” without necessarily thinking politically about the hierarchies of power and privilege between groups, or the hierarchies of value placed on their respective characteristics. Based on their commonalities, then, I argue that the analytical grouping of these three concepts together allows for a crucial cross-application of -- and conversation between -- critical analyses of each that are quite useful in thinking about the others, but are not typically brought into dialogue with one another. The grouping emphasizes my attention to underlying assumptions, to the fundamental ideologies that undergird and bring together otherwise seemingly divergent descriptions of difference or techniques for confronting it.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Latin American Immigration to the United States**

The United States of America is a country made up primarily of immigrants, and yet its relationship specifically to Latino immigration has long been vexed by contradictions. United States discourse espouses an “American Dream” narrative, wherein (every)one can do and become anything, while it simultaneously militarizes its borders and decreases possibilities for entry or recognition for immigrants. Lowe (1996) writes that “the heroic quest, the triumph over weakness, the promises of salvation, prosperity, and progress: this is the American feeling” (p. 2). She goes on to argue, however, that “the ‘immigrant’ [is] produced by the law as margin and threat to that symbolic whole” (p.8).

In this chapter I explore some of the impacts of narratives about Latino immigration to the U.S., situating these narratives in the context of U.S. international political and economic policy. I go on to consider social workers’ participation in the development and reproduction of these narratives through their interactions with immigrants and with the national discourse on immigration. It is my goal, then to not merely identify U.S. legal and policy responses to immigration but rather to also provide a brief analysis of the national discourses on immigration which simultaneously celebrate diversity and reinforce a power differential between the supposed U.S. national/American citizen and immigrants, particularly those identified as “illegal” or “alien”. I will then briefly consider some ways in which social workers might (re)produce or contest those discourses. This discussion will set the stage for the next chapter,

which will provide a careful analysis of social work's depictions of Latino immigrants and immigration in practice and theory.

### **Latino Immigration**

The U.S.' imperialist expansion and interventions in Latin America have produced a concurrent trend of displaced populations and mass migration of Latin American people to the U.S. However, mainstream discourse around immigration in the U.S., particularly Latin American immigration, has neglected to draw any connection to the historical role of the U.S. and U.S. capital on the global stage. I would argue that it is fundamental to situate a paper which explores the experience of Latin American immigrants within the context of the United States' capitalist projects -- local and international -- and its efforts to consolidate its nation-state identity.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2012a) 39.9 million foreign-born people were residing in the United States in 2010 (p.1), and approximately forty percent of them were from South or Central America (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012b, p.5). In January of 2011 there were an estimated 11.5 million "unauthorized" immigrants residing in the United States, up from 8.5 million in 2000 (Dept. of Homeland Security, 2012, p.3). Despite the fact that only fifty nine percent of these "unauthorized" immigrants were from Mexico (Dept. of Homeland Security, 2012, p. 1), the Department of Homeland Security reports that "92 percent of the 1.2 million foreign nationals apprehended by immigration officials were from Mexico" (Furman, Negi, and Cisneros-Howard, 2008, p. 283).

According to Massey and Pren (2012), since the 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act, which created quotas for the number of immigrants who could obtain

authorization to enter the U.S., a discourse of “illegality” has developed in the United States that marks unauthorized immigration as a threat to the country. They argue that this discourse has both shifted public opinion about immigration as well as impacted immigration policy (Massey and Pren, 2012). They write that

the rise of illegal migration, its framing as a threat to the nation, and the resulting conservative reaction set off a self-feeding chain reaction of enforcement that generated more apprehensions even though the flow of undocumented migrants had stabilized in the late 1970s and actually dropped during the late 1980s and early 1990s. (p. 9)

They also link national responses to acts of terrorism in the United States (none carried out by “illegal” immigrants) to the increase in militarization of the border and the tremendous increase of deportations, specifically of undocumented Central American immigrants (Massey and Pren, 2012). For example,

in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, on October 26, 2001 Congress passed, without significant debate, the USA PATRIOT Act, which granted executive authorities even greater powers to deport, without hearings or any presentation of evidence, all noncitizens—legal or illegal, temporary or permanent—who the attorney General had ‘reason to believe’ might commit, further, or facilitate acts of terrorism.

(Massey and Pren, 2012, p. 20)

Massey and Pren (2012) draw the conclusion that the increased presence of Latino undocumented immigrants is, paradoxically, a result of restrictive policies and border militarization, which have contributed to a cycle of increasingly negative rhetoric associated with immigrants, negative public opinion towards immigrants, and greater restrictions. This cycle contributes to a decrease in immigrants’ ability to move back and forth between the U.S. and

their countries of origin more fluidly, forcing immigrants who arrive in the U.S. to stay there. It has led to diminishing availability, relative to demand, of authorizations for entry by Mexicans and Central Americans, but has certainly not deterred immigrants from coming to the U.S. “illegally.” “As a result”, they write, “nearly three-quarters of the roughly 11 million undocumented migrants in the United States today are from Mexico and Central America...To say that US immigration policies have failed is an understatement” (Massey and Pren, 2012, p. 23-24).

Still, Latin American immigration to the United States must be considered not as an isolated phenomenon only in response to U.S. immigration policy and public opinion, but within the context of the past century of globalization. Taking a world systems perspective, Sassen (1998) points out that the mobility of people and the mobility of money and capital are fundamentally correlated. She points out that neoliberal trade agreements have facilitated drastic changes to local economies in Latin America and elsewhere, including, significantly, the growth of industrialized export agriculture industries that upset traditional farming practices and rural economies. In Mexico, for instance, this has caused massive dislocation of people from the countryside, who have then sought employment in foreign-owned assembly plants in the northern cities, or in the United States, where there is a constant demand for immigrant labor (Sassen, 1998).

Gonzalez and Fernandez (2002) expand upon Sassen’s (1998) analysis by pointing out that relations between nation-states -- and not just a monolithic global capitalist system -- bear responsibility for the economic interventions that cause mass dislocation and immigration. They argue that the ‘push’ factors of upset economies and the ‘pull’ factors of labor demand in the

U.S. cannot be seen as independent phenomenon, but as two sides of America's official economic imperialism towards Mexico (Gonzalez & Fernandez, 2002).

If the U.S. plays an integral role in creating the conditions that promote mass immigration from Latin America, it must be asked why the U.S. invests so much money, resources and political energy into immigration control, and particularly the construction, enforcement, and militarization of its border with Mexico. This question becomes all the more salient when one considers that the reinforcement and militarization of the border since 1994 have dramatically increased the dangers of crossing into the U.S., causing a surge in deaths by border-crossers, without actually decreasing the rate of undocumented immigration into the country at all (Immigration Policy Center, 2005). Indeed, a report by the Immigration Policy Center (2005) notes that the construction of triple-fencing along the border in San Diego reduced the number of undocumented border-crossing apprehensions in that section of the border by more than 75 percent, while increasing the number of apprehensions in the Tuscon sector in the same period by 342 percent (Immigration Policy Center, 2005). The report suggests a motive for border militarization other than just keeping immigrants out: putting undocumented immigrants in a more vulnerable position ensures that they will be available as inexpensive labor for U.S. capitalist interests (Immigration Policy Center, 2005).

Nevins (2001) agrees, pointing out that by raising the stakes of an undocumented border crossing, the US has created a population that, being under constant intimidation by the threat of deportation, has become much more vulnerable to labor exploitation. According to Nevins (2001) and Wise (2006), it is no mistake that NAFTA -- which opened up borders to trade between the U.S. and Mexico -- and Operation Gatekeeper -- which instituted a militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border -- were both passed in the same year. Wise (2006) argues that NAFTA's

imperialist project requires Mexican labor both in Mexico and in the U.S. to serve the interests of financial capital and U.S. multinational corporations. Nevins (2001) writes that United States is supposedly invested in creating and maintaining “law and order...by ‘closing’ the boundary to ‘illegal’ activities such as unauthorized entries” (p. 135) while investing in “economic prosperity” by inviting the flow of goods and capital. But the supposed protection of “law and order” means that restrictions that protect people are being eliminated, while those that protect corporate interests are being nurtured (p.135).

Nevins (2001) argues that the U.S. government invested in Operation Gatekeeper simultaneous to the institution of NAFTA because they anticipated that undocumented immigration from Mexico to the U.S. would increase, due to the “liberalization of the Mexican economy” (Nevins, 2001, p. 138). The U.S. all but acknowledged its role in instigating “illegal” immigration from Latin America. And while the U.S. government presents a narrative about the breaking down of borders via globalizing projects such as NAFTA, the simultaneous border militarization allows the U.S. to engage in globalization while also reinscribing the power of the nation-state. Or as Nevins (2001) writes, “globalization can actually serve to enhance differences between citizens and ‘aliens’” (p, 138).

Peter Andreas (2000) elaborates on this argument with his study of the militarization of the border, which draws a connection between the opening of the borders to trade, on the one hand, and the emphatic and simultaneous re-territorialization of the state on the other. Andreas (2000) argues “that the escalation of border policing has ultimately been less about deterring the flow of drugs and migrants than about recrafting the image of the border and symbolically reaffirming the state’s territorial authority” (p. xiv). The border, then, plays a key symbolic, ideological role for the construction of national identity (Vila, 2000).



Indeed Hall (1996) writes that the nation-state develops its national identity largely through the construction of the other:

identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the 'other', the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive' meaning of any term -- and this is its 'identity' -- can be constructed.

(Hall, 1996, p. 4-5)

Nevins (2001) applies such a standpoint to the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, arguing that this militarization was part of a broader effort to consolidate the juridical and discursive divide between "legal" and "illegal" beings. The United States both (re)produces and performs its national identity through the creation of Others-- ("illegal") immigrants. Border control serves as a key symbol and spectacle in this effort.

Luibheid (2002) points out that this symbolic construction of the nation-state has a very literal effect, through deliberate standards for inclusion and exclusion. She argues that

immigration control is not just a powerful symbol of nationhood and people but also a means to literally construct the nation and the people in particular ways. This fact has been compellingly documented through analyses of how immigration exclusions have produced particular racial, ethnic, and class compositions in the United States."

(Luibheid, 2002, p. xviii)

Indeed, Ong (1996) contends that even for those who achieve authorized immigrant status, achieving recognition as a citizen of the nation-state is a power-laden process. She writes that that citizenship is "a cultural process of 'subject-ification', in the Foucauldian sense of self-making and being-made by power relations that produce consent through schemas of

surveillance, discipline, control and administration” (On, 1996, p.737). Lowe (1996) also speaks to this power dynamic, arguing that the immigrant “alien’s” transformation by the state into an American citizen “institutionalizes the disavowal of the history of racialized labor exploitation and disenfranchisement through the promise of freedom in the political sphere” (p. 10). While the immigrant’s economic and political history may be negated in the process of becoming “legal,” their racial identity and history are very much present. She argues that the naturalization process “exacerbates the contradictions of the national project that promises the resolution of material inequalities through the political domain of equal representation” (Lowe, 1996, p. 10).

In writing about Asian immigration to the United States, Lowe (1996) makes the important point that there is also a space for immigrant agency and/or a challenging of nation-state narratives through the very production of immigrants as “other”. She writes,

If the law is the apparatus that binds and seals the universality of the political body of the nation, then the ‘immigrant’, produced by the law as margin and threat to that symbolic whole, is precisely a generative site for the critique of that universality. (p. 8)

Multiculturalism, according to Lowe (1996), seeks to dampen that threat, to forestall the critique by providing a space for the “non-American” to enter into the U.S. cultural domain by separating them from their history. Still though, she argues, this contradiction between the political and the cultural indicates a “gap” where immigrants can and do have agency. Lowe (1996) writes that “Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have not only been ‘subject to’ immigration exclusion and restriction but have also been ‘subjects of’ the immigration process and are agents of political change, cultural expression, and social transformation” (p. 9). This is a crucial intervention as it speaks to the ways that immigrant subjects redeploy the very losses (and

exclusions) that are imposed on them and incorporate them into their individual and collective identities, transforming those losses into sites of change and empowerment.

### **Social Work and Latino Immigration**

The theories that orient social workers' practice with Latino immigrants, must be held accountable for their participation in the construction of national narratives of self and other. For these narratives are bound up with a matrix of power that partakes in the often violent exclusion of particular subjects from discursive or geographical inclusion in the nation-state. In the following chapter, I consider the rhetoric and the practice that social work as a field has developed around work with immigrants, and ask how it participates in the broader context of national immigration policy and discourse. To do so, I discuss how social work has historically engaged with, made sense of, and informed Latin American immigration in the U.S., considering some of the continuities in social workers' roles, attitudes and identities with respect to immigrants' inclusion in the U.S. This look at institutional approaches and points of engagement with immigrants will set the stage and establish the stakes for the next chapter's analysis of the recent literature on social work practice with Latino immigrants.

Since the mid nineteenth century social workers have been working with and for immigrant communities. Those associated with the settlement houses in Chicago, such as Jane Addams, Lillian D. Wald, Emily Greene Balch, and Grace Abott (Leonard, 1973, p. 271), specifically advocated for social workers to protect and support immigrants. According to Leonard (1973) and Park (2006), they formed the Immigrants' Protective League in 1908 to "protect [immigrants] from exploitation and neglect" (Park, 2006, p. 187) during their "usually difficult period of adjustment to American life" (Leonard, 1973, p. 272). These early social workers argued that the new wave of immigrants -- though popularly portrayed through

narratives of more racialized difference than their Northwestern European counterparts from the previous wave of immigration -- might nevertheless prove to be “valuable additions to national life” (Leonard, 1973, p. 271). But Park (2006) points out that social workers’ interventions in immigrants’ processes of immigration were undertaken with the simultaneous intention of preventing them from presenting a “problem” or “danger” to American life -- that is, the Immigrants’ Protective League sought simultaneous protection for and from immigrants’ difference.

Grace Abott, a significant leader in the Immigrants’ Protective League, manifested this contradiction by advocating empathy and protection towards immigrants while nevertheless conceding that they posed a threat to U.S. national life. Abott acknowledged a relationship between increasing socioeconomic problems in the U.S. and increasing immigration to the U.S., but according to Leonard (1973), Abbott argued that these problems were not “due to [the immigrants] inferior national characteristics but to the kind of life they faced” (p. 275). This ideological stance translated into the League’s investment in developing programs to protect immigrants from exploitation and support them in adjusting to mainstream American culture (Leonard, 1973). Such efforts to assimilate immigrants and alleviate the difficulties facing them would, in turn, alleviate the supposed stress caused to the rest of the nation by their arrival. Social Workers involved with the League even impacted policy and worked with the federal government to protect immigrants at the ports of arrival (Park, 2006). These interventions, however, were aimed as much at the management of immigrants’ difference as the defense of it.

Park (2006) writes that this dynamic between social workers and immigrant clients was a “maternalistic construction” (p. 187), wherein social workers not only protected immigrants from exploitation but also American “natives” from immigrants. She also writes that the “measures

devised in protection of immigrants included functions designed for the control and supervision of immigrants, the purposeful dispersal of immigrants out of the cities of arrival, and the socialization of immigrants to become ‘Americanized’” (Park, 2006, p. 188). I would argue that this “maternalistic” relationship has continued to shape contemporary social work practice and theory with Latino immigrants. It is important, therefore, to explore the broad political effects of programs and interventions aimed at providing opportunities and resources to immigrants, especially those where social workers serve as the mediating links between immigrants and the nation-state.

In recent years, the construction of immigrant “illegality” has compelled social workers to make serious ethical decisions about how to work with immigrants in the face of the increasing criminalization of their status in the country (Furman, Ackerman, Loya, Jones, and Negi, 2012). According to Haverkamp (2008),

a social worker is often the first person people talk to about their immigration issues. I have had several cases that would have gone nowhere without the help of dedicated social workers who helped clients gather key evidence, wrote detailed evaluations, or were the primary contact with police officers. For many immigration cases, it is important that a knowledgeable social worker be involved in the process. (p. 26)

The stakes for social workers’ mediation between immigrants and immigration policy are extremely high, as they take on several roles that hold significant power for impacting immigrants’ rights, access to resources, and their immigration status. Martinez-Brawley and Zorita (2011) have documented several of these in their case study:

in a child welfare unit of the Department of Children and Family Services of the county of Los Angeles, California, the following are among the reported tasks of social workers:

processing immigration status regularization applications; processing work permits; obtaining replacement for lost or stolen 'green cards'; filing US naturalization for eligible children; assisting children to obtain social security cards and California IDs. (Martinez-Brawley and Zorita, 2011, p. 22)

These examples demonstrate the persistence of social workers' roles as protectors of immigrants in the realm of advocacy, resource distribution, and navigating complex systems.

In light of Park's (2006) critique of early social workers' "maternalistic" approach, it is imperative to maintain a curious stance about the various impacts of social workers' attitudes and narratives as they carry out these vital tasks. Martinez-Brawley and Zorita (2011), for example, write that "social workers deeply involved in services that rescue immigrants from imminent danger bemoan the tendency of quickly criminalizing the behaviors of immigrants" (p. 23).

While these authors describe social workers taking on an anti-oppressive stance towards immigrants, their rhetorical choices are striking. Their articulation of social workers "rescuing" immigrants from "imminent danger" (Martinez-Brawley and Zorita, 2011, p. 23) is reminiscent of the aforementioned "maternalistic" dynamic which Park (2006) identified.

Martinez-Brawley and Zorita (2011) also identify social workers' organizational task of creating "pressure groups" (p. 23) and doing deliberate advocacy work that endeavors to shift public policy. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) "Immigration Policy Toolkit" published in 2008 advocates that all social workers should develop competency around immigration, "to fight discrimination against immigrants, and to take social and political action in support of the rights of immigrants" (NASW, 2008, p. 2). However, in a statement that resonates strikingly with the Immigrants' Protective League narrative about immigrants, the NASW says in 2006 that "we also tend to become protectionists when the economic and cultural

scales get unbalanced and we perceive the newcomers as a threat to our financial status and way of life” (NASW, 2008, p. 3). The NASW (2008) goes on to state that “throughout history, social workers have been instrumental in helping newcomers of all descriptions make the transition into American society. Social workers have also worked with communities that received immigrants, preparing them for increases diversity and new complexity in cultural dynamics” (p. 3). This description of the historical relationship between immigrant communities and social workers is reminiscent of earlier social work discourse around immigration where the role of social workers was one of simultaneously supporting immigrants in adjusting to American life and of protecting U.S. “natives” from the perceived “threat” that immigrants supposedly pose. Critiquing this role that social workers have taken on, Park (2006) writes: “Though intended to counter the construction of immigrants as sources of peril, the representation of the pitiable immigrant in desperate need of protection of a benevolent and responsible society fueled the discourses they attempted to disarm” (p. 187).

Park and Bhuyan (2012) propose that social workers’ deep involvement in the provision of services and the construction of discourse around immigration begs fundamental questions about the role of the field of social work: “What is the profession’s relationship to the law? To social policies? How does and should the profession make sense of its own ethics, politics, and identity in relationship to those laws and policies?” (p. 20). Martinez-Brawley and Zorita (2011) write that in the context of “anti-oppressive” work with and for immigrants, social workers often have a complicated or contradictory relationship to professionalism. They point out that working with immigrants is often “marked not only by involvement in advocacy but also by the need to find and utilize system loopholes” (Martinez-Brawley and Zorita, 2011, p. 25). Park and Bhuyan (2012) go on to argue that,

if social work is, as we believe it to be, as much about advocating for social change as it is about ameliorating social needs, then the views of practitioners as well as those of society at large that reify and maintain naturalized taxonomies of worth and belonging must be continually challenged. (p. 35)

In the interest of challenging such views in the minds of social workers and in society at large, this paper will seek to explore in some detail the possibility that social workers' benevolent attitudes and identities with respect to immigrants might end up re-producing the narratives of otherness that are central to the ongoing criminalization of immigrants' lives in discourse and policy.



## CHAPTER 3

### **Social Work Literature on Immigration: A Discourse Analysis**

#### **Discourses on Immigration in Early Social Work**

Social work emerged as a field in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries at a time when immigration was increasing drastically, and early social workers in the Progressive Era were centrally concerned with supporting immigrants in accessing resources, and in integrating into American society. (Park & Kemp, 2006; Potocky, 1997). Park and Kemp (2006) identify two distinct strains of thought that prevailed during this period about social workers' roles with immigrants. The majority of social workers believed that immigrants should be encouraged to assimilate to American culture. Park and Kemp (2006) argue that underlying this belief was "a fundamentally racialized, anthologizing conceptualization of immigrants and constructions of immigrants, their homes, and their neighborhoods as contaminants lodged in the nation's cities" (p.708). On the other end of the spectrum were a more progressive group of social workers -- including Jane Addams and Grace Abbott, the founding director of the Chicago Immigrants' Protective League -- who advocated for better treatment of immigrants. This view was informed by an attitude of tolerance for immigrants and their cultures and a more structural view of the causes for immigrants' poor living conditions. These social workers espoused "a modified form of cultural pluralism that allowed immigrants to retain key elements of cultural identity while encouraging their engagement in the civilizing benefits of American life, including, education,

gainful employment, and civic participation” (Park & Kemp, 2006, p. 708). Potocky (1997) identifies these two competing meta-narratives as the assimilationist and pluralist models.

Park (2006), however, claims that these two meta-narratives were, in a certain sense, two sides of the same coin. The more progressive pluralist model, she argues, depended on the simultaneous operation of the assimilationist model in public discourse on immigration. She writes that “the kinds of individuals legitimated for full participation in the nation, declared genuine Americans or members of Americanizable stock, in other words, depended on the parallel determination of the converse: those deemed too alien, too degenerate, too inferior for inclusion” (p. 175). And both, ultimately, operated to effect a certain othering of immigrants, whether through defamation or lauding of their culture. Park writes,

one of the most troubling aspects of the discourse examined was that strands of the discourse which clearly aimed to contest such alienating stereotypes were equally proficient in defaming immigrants. In fact, some of the most blatant constructions of exotification and problematization were found in writings that purported to present immigrant differences in a positive light. (p.178)

Park’s critique of this covert cooperation between assimilationist and pluralist narratives about immigration is particularly important in light of these narratives’ persistent influence in contemporary social work discourse around multiculturalism and cultural competency with immigrant communities. Today, social work’s emphasis on cultural competency advocates tolerance and diversity, which is understood as a more progressive paradigm, but I hope to illuminate the ways in which this discourse is embedded in a system of power that sustains racial hierarchies and unequal power distribution.

## **Discourses on Immigration in Contemporary Social Work**

According to Abrams and Moio (2009), the immediate roots of social work's emphasis on cultural competency lie in the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s that demanded attention to racial politics in the context of a radical challenge to existing structures of power. But as the U.S. settled into a multiculturalist framework that lauded diversity while obfuscating power relations, the field of social work followed suit with the development of a cultural competency approach whose complicity with existing racial hierarchies has only recently come into question.

Although cultural competency, acculturation, and multiculturalism describe different phenomenon, they have in common a particular understanding of culture generally, and of the cultural encounter between immigrant and white cultures in America. Cultural competency was first defined by Green (1982) as "the ability to conduct professional work in a way that is consistent with the expectations which members of a distinctive culture regard as appropriate among themselves" (p. 55). Thus most authors identify the culturally competent social worker as one who has an extensive knowledge and understanding of cultural values from various groups, while cultivating some degree of self-awareness about one's own culturally determined assumptions. Acculturation is "a pivotal process which refers to the newcomers' adaptation to the culture of the new society. Individuals adjust to adopt behavior patterns or practices, values, rules and symbols of the new environment" (Valtonen, 2008, p. 60). Theories of acculturation vary in complexity from theories of assimilation -- wherein immigrants are expected to adapt inevitably and unilaterally to U.S. culture -- to multidimensional acculturation, where immigrants' agency in deciding how to engage with U.S. culture is theorized alongside an understanding of U.S. society's willingness to accommodate aspects of newcomers' cultures

(Chirkov, 2009; Lopez, Escoto, Monford-Dent, and Prado-Steiman, 2011; Wolsko, Park and Judd, 2006).

These concepts have in common an understanding of the United States as a multicultural society, wherein various cultures interact and co-exist without giving up their specificity. Cultural competency represents social work's commitment to provision of services to these minority clients and communities without demanding that they adapt to U.S. white culture. Acculturation is both a descriptive and a prescriptive model that understands -- and asks -- immigrants to adapt to a certain extent to U.S. white culture without abandoning their cultural values. Thus, multiculturalism, acculturation and cultural competency have in common an emphasis on tolerance and management of diversity, with 'culture' serving as a central organizing concept and value.

In this section, I will provide a critical examination of some of the explicit claims and implicit assumptions shared by cultural competency, acculturation, and multiculturalist narratives. These critiques are based on a close reading and discourse analysis of several popular social work texts from the past twenty years on the topic of multicultural practice and work with immigrants. By interrogating some of the limitations of these theoretical frameworks, I hope to demonstrate that social work literature on practice with Latino immigrants has been reluctant to take into account the role of power relationships in causing immigration, in defining immigrant identity, and in structuring relationships between cultural groups and their members, including social workers and clients themselves. Likewise, it has failed to acknowledge accountability for its own role in the discursive and performative construction of those immigrant identities that it purports to describe. This critical discourse analysis will set the stage for a move towards other

theories, such as theories of melancholia, to provide a more nuanced approach to social work practice with Latino immigrants.

My discourse analysis will seek to interrogate the a series of implicit assumptions that permeate most of the texts around social work practice with Latino immigrants and/or with people of color in the United States. I hope to demonstrate that social work texts on cultural competency and acculturation negate the role of power relationships in their operation via (1) a glorification of cultural pluralism; (2) a negation of the role of U.S. cultural and economic imperialism that subjects immigrants to U.S. power and culture prior to their arrival in the country; and (3) an individualized, voluntaristic understanding of the process of acculturation. But these texts -- and social work practice informed by them -- do not only work to obfuscate power relationships -- they play an active role in reproducing them. They accomplish this via (1) a reification of culture that assumes immigrants will serve as 'authentic' representatives of their cultures of origin and a resultant emphasis on social worker knowledge acquisition about specific cultural values and traditions; (2) a conflation of race and culture that enlists these descriptions of cultural specificity in the production of racial hierarchies; (3) the construction of a self/other relationship between whiteness, on the one hand, and culture on the other; and (4) an implicit idealization of integration into U.S. white culture as the ultimate goal.

### **Cultural Competency Literature and the Negation of Power**

Social work texts about working with immigrants and/or people of color idealize cultural pluralism but often exclude conversations about power. While authors such as Lum (1999) and Valtonen (2008) have incorporated more structural analyses that take into account power dynamics, I was disconcerted to find that many texts contain simplistic celebrations of multiculturalism. Balgopal (2000), for example, writes that "cultural pluralism gives all groups

an equal opportunity to interact on an equal footing with an emphasis on mutual acceptance and equal opportunity to obtain society's resources" (p.22) and that "cultural pluralism is necessary because it recognizes the uniqueness of different cultures and allows immigrants to maintain their beliefs, customs, and values" (p.23).

This glorification of pluralism lacks a "critical examination of oppressive societal structures, dominant-subordinate power differential, formation and reformation of multiple identities" (Ngo, 2008, p.1). Miyoshi (2000) argues that this rhetoric's lack of attention to power differentials is not only an oversight, but a technique for validating these differentials: "The abstract principle of multiculturalism, an expression of liberal open-mindedness and progressive tolerance, much too often stands in for an alibi to exonerate the existing privileges, inequities, and class differences" (p. 44). These authors demonstrate that multiculturalist texts may obscure the power structures that immigrants are confronted by, thereby giving social work students a naive and distorted image of the possibilities of multiculturalism or pluralism to provide immigrants with "equal opportunities."

Sleeter and McLaren (1995) point out that the motive for this denial of power relations lies not only in a defense of U.S. racial politics, but of its economic system as well. "Left liberal multiculturalism," they claim,

treats difference as an 'essence' that exists independently of history, culture and power...This perspective is based on the intellectual 'sameness' among the races, that is, on their cognitive equivalence or the rationality imminent in all races that permits them to compete equally in a capitalist society. (p. 40-41)

They make a valuable intervention that ties the supposed equalizing power of multiculturalism to the underlying need of capitalism to identify all people as equally able to succeed, if they work hard enough.

Multiculturalist rhetoric also collaborates with capitalist logic by taking a view of immigration and acculturation that begins only upon the immigrant's arrival in the U.S. This framework excludes an examination of the ways in which immigrants are impacted by U.S. cultural, social, political, and economic imperialism long before immigrating. Underlying this view is an understanding of immigrants' cultures of origin in their home countries as separate, authentic, and stable. As discussed in my Phenomenon chapter above, however, immigrants' cultures and identities have already been impacted by U.S. culture in their countries of origin through historical and contemporary processes of imperialism. Furthermore, their migration is very likely impacted, if not impelled, by U.S. imperialist interventions. Social work texts' failure to address this point constitutes a further obfuscation of the role of power relations and domination in structuring immigration and the struggle over immigrant acculturation (see, e.g., Balgopal, 2000; Boyle & Springer, 2001; Delgado, 2007; Falicov, 1998; Fong, 2004; Zuniga, 2002). Fong and Furuto (2001), for example, include sections describing push and pull factors for immigration from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Central America, but make no mention of the role of U.S. military interventions in Central America, neocolonial rule over Puerto Rico, or economic domination of Mexico.

In another negation of how power functions, I have also found that many social work texts on multiculturalism and working with immigrants have framed immigration and acculturation as voluntary and individual acts. They fail to address the role of economic, political and social structures in influencing/limiting an immigrant's relationship to citizenship, social

capital, and possibilities for accessing U.S. resources. Fong and Furuto (2001), for example, write that social workers should not interfere with immigrants' "right to freedom of choice" (p.54) when it comes to the "cost-benefit analysis" (p. 57) of their acculturation processes. Chirkov (2009) defines acculturation as an "agential process," whereby the immigrant is involved in, "a deliberate, reflective, and, for the most part, comparative cognitive activity" (p. 178).

Some authors such as Lum (1999) and Voltonen (2008) have moved towards more structural critiques that are beginning to examine U.S. systems that deny immigrants inclusion and/or resources, placing limitations on their "voluntary" acculturation. Lopez, Escoto, Monford-Dent, and Prado-Steiman (2011) describe a theory of multi-dimensional acculturation that takes into account the host culture's, in this case the U.S., reception of immigrants and social/political systems' ability to integrate immigrants and meet their needs. But if these texts are concerned with the social worker's role in facilitating acculturation, and they have begun to understand acculturation as a contested, power-laden process, it seems odd that none of them acknowledge the existence of power relationships between social worker and client. Indeed, I have not found any texts that acknowledge the ways that immigrants' narratives about their identities and their processes of adapting to the U.S. are co-constructed through their relationship and dynamic with their social worker. Inevitably, the social worker is in a role of power, and is in a position -- to a certain extent -- of speaking for the nation-state. This oversight demonstrates the need for an intersubjective approach to intercultural social work that understands identities as performative and always in (re)production.

Abrams and Moio (2009) identify such social work exchange as "mutually influential and intersubjective, rather than morally neutral" (p.247). Using an intersubjective and performative



lens, Jeffery (2005) argues that whiteness has in fact become embedded in the definition of professional social work itself. She identifies the power dynamic inherent in social work's emphasis on 'mastery' of cultural competency techniques to demonstrate that the power of the professional social worker is constituted in correlation with the domination of the client. She writes that "there is no 'client' until I perform white professional social work competence and masterfully identify her needs. We are thus mutually constituted in a relation of dominance" (p. 424). In this scene, the role of the social worker is described as not only reflective, but constitutive of power relationships that structure immigrant experience in the United States.

### **Cultural Competency Literature and the (Re)production of Hierarchies of Cultures**

The above insights from Abrams and Moio (2009) and Jeffery (2005) draw an important connection between the obfuscation of power relationships and their (re)production, demonstrating that the two operate simultaneously. In the following section I will examine several ways in which social work texts about practice with immigrants and people of color deploy a discourse of cultural difference that actively constructs and reinforces racial hierarchies. They accomplish this through a reification of culture, a conflation of culture with race, the establishment of a self-other relationship between whiteness and 'culture,' and an implicit idealization of whiteness and, therefore, of assimilation.

In examining social work texts about working with Latinos, immigrants, and other people of color it was striking to come upon the taxonomies that authors create which simultaneously articulate and (re)produce notions of cultural difference. Fong and Furuto (2001), whose texts on culturally competent practice are frequently used in social work practice classes, make an explicit argument that the task of the culturally competent social worker is to gather and master as much knowledge as possible about each culture's history, traditions, and values. They write

that “the value and belief systems that comprise traditions and cultural norms need to be presented as central to the ethnic client’s functioning” (Fong & Furuto, 2001, p. 5). Consequently they divide their book, *Culturally Competent Practice: Skills, Interventions, and Evaluations*, into multiple chapters each dedicated to a distinct culture. This has become something of a standard format for texts on cultural competency: Fong (2004), Sue (2006), Balgopal (2000), Potocky-Tripodi (2002), Guitierrez, Yeakley, and Ortega (2000), and Delgado (2007) provide taxonomies of cultural values which they identify as inherent to particular cultural groups. Sue (2006) for example, asserts that Asian clients will think “silence is respect” (p. 136), Latinos will have a “religious distinction between mind and body” (p. 136), and African Americans will place importance “on nonverbal behavior” (p. 136). Additionally, Delgado (2007) identifies a list of values that Latinos share, including *familismo*, *respeto*, *personalismo*, *machismo*, and *marianismo*.

The assertion that knowledge of specific cultural values is central to cultural competency is a problematic one that has been critiqued by various authors. This assertion partakes of an essentializing narrative that represents cultures as fixed and authentic, while encouraging their appreciation and mastery by outsiders. And importantly, whiteness is never included among the lists of cultures, an omission that establishes whiteness as a norm and people of color as ‘Others.’

Scott (1992) critiques the impetus towards gathering specific cultural knowledge and argues that within this framework “identity is taken as the referential sign of a fixed set of customs, practices and meanings, an enduring heritage, a readily identifiable sociological category, a set of shared traits and/or experiences” (p. 14). Park (2005) argues that these articulations of specific cultural values merely reify cultural stereotypes: “While stereotypes of racial characteristics are vehemently repudiated in social work discourse, stereotypes fashioned

from “culture,” a term used interchangeably with, and as a descriptor for race, escapes equal censure” (p. 23). She argues that although cultural competence authors within the social work field (Balgopal, 2000; Delgado, 2007; Fong, 2004; Fong and Furuto, 2001; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Sue, 2006) may provide progressive definitions of culture that acknowledge its fluidity, they nonetheless rely upon the integrity and stability of the notion of culture itself. Park (2005) writes:

Such essentialist definitions of culture are usually modified, appended often with caveats asserting that, in fact, ‘culture’ is not static but ever changing, and additionally, that people, being individual, have differing levels of identification or ties to their cultures. These caveats, do not, however, substantively affect the functional conceptualization and deployment of ‘culture’ in the discourse, since the idea of changeability and fluidity are assigned not to the category of ‘culture’ itself, but the specifics of characteristic attributes. Remaining embedded within the caveat is the identification of a static core ‘culture’ which can be modified and differentially adhered to, since variance must center around something, and modification presupposes a core entity which can be modified but remain discernible as itself. (p. 23)

The establishment of a notion of culture as fixed and authentic can lead to a variety of problematic assumptions and power dynamics. Aparicio (1994) writes that the “cheerleading efforts” on diversity “tend to be, in the comfort of university classrooms, mere exercises in touristic voyeurism particularly when specific cultures are being defined and represented from the outside” (p. 584). Perry (2002) writes that this form of cultural competence, “tends to exoticize others in a nativistic retreat that locates difference in a primeval past of cultural authenticity”(p. 196). Here we can see that acquiring specific cultural knowledge in order to be

culturally competent not only acts as a sort of “touristic voyeurism” but it also exotifies immigrants -- it depends on notions of “cultural authenticity” where “a specific individual act is assumed to be the product of a group identity and further, is used to define the group” (Volpp, 2000, p. 95).

This essentialized representation of various cultures stands in stark contrast to the lack of information provided about the cultural characteristics of whiteness. Indeed, the invisibility of whiteness and the essentializing of other cultures go hand in hand to establish whiteness as a norm. Jeffery (2005) writes that

as long as social work practice is synonymous with benign notions of diversity management and the development of competencies, we remain unable to reconcile being a ‘good’ social worker with anti-racist practice... This notion is reliant on the idea of unmarked whiteness as a cipher, as nothingness, yet at the same time, everything. (p. 411)

Jeffery (2005) clarifies her point by sharing McIntyre’s (1997) articulation that a white social worker or educator, “can ‘perform’ the multicultural tricks while never having to critique her positionality as a beneficiary of the system” (p. 13). These authors demonstrate the danger in failing to describe white culture within multiculturalist frameworks that strive to identify “diverse” values.

By excluding a section on white culture, these multicultural texts work on the premise that whiteness is the norm and thus does not need to be identified. Sue (2006), for example, cautions social workers that non-white clients (p. 141) are not likely to value insight: “We need to realize that insight is not highly valued by many culturally diverse clients... Many Asian elders believe that thinking too much about something can cause problems” (p. 141). Looking

momentarily past the obvious collusion with orientalist stereotypes, it is interesting to note that in this formulation ‘diversity’ is used as though it were a characteristic of people of color themselves, specifically of “Asian elders,” but not a characteristic of the community of social workers, presumably white. That is, the phrase “culturally diverse” is used to mean “non-white” – different from the norm – giving the lie to multiculturalist definitions of “diversity” that purport to describe a neutral field of variation with no implicit hierarchy. Similarly, Fong and Furuto (2001) contrast the values of “culturally diverse clients” from “mainstream American families”(p.51). Here the implicit message is that “mainstream American families” are white. People of color and immigrants, on the other hand, are “diverse.” Those that are diverse are not and cannot be “mainstream American families”.

Park (2005) provides an insightful critique of this Othering process within multicultural frameworks. She argues that:

Against the blank, white backdrop of the ‘culture-free’ mainstream, the ‘cultured’ Others are made visible in sharp relief, and this visibility—a sign of separateness and differentiation from the standard—are inscriptions of marginality. Embedded in the conceptualization of culture as difference, in other words, is that of difference conceptualized as deficiency. ‘Culture’ in this arithmetic is a marker for the periphery, a contradictory descriptor for a deficit, since to have ‘culture,’ in this schema, is to be assigned a position subordinate to that of those inscribed as without “culture.” (p. 22)

Culture, therefore, constitutes an othering rhetorical tool, described as a peculiar deficit that is differentially ascribed to particular groups

Thus “diversity” and “culture” are coded as descriptors for people of color exclusively, even though they claim to represent an array of people generally. Such coding participates in the

othering of immigrants and people of color, burdening them with the label of “diversity” or “culture” that purports neutrality while actually marking difference and deficit. Scott (1992) writes that “‘diversity’ refers to a plurality of identities, and it is seen as a condition of human existence rather than as the effect of an enunciation of difference that constitutes hierarchies and asymmetries of power” (p, 14). Here we can read Scott’s (1992) critique as an analysis of how these narrations of particular cultural values and traditions are articulated through a notion of implicitly egalitarian cultural “diversity” when they really (re)produce the very power structures/hierarchies that create those differences. In other words, diversity marks “difference” and “difference” has to indicate “difference-from.” Thus immigrants and people of color are marked as “different from” -- and implicitly less-than -- the norm of whiteness.

Volpp (2000) provides another clear articulation of this critique through a specific example. In response to texts such as Delgado’s (2007) and Balgopal’s (2000), wherein machismo is identified as an uniquely Latino value to be minimized through the process of acculturation – wherein more equitable gender dynamics emerge – Volpp (2000) writes that,

what appears truly to underlie the assumption of a peculiarly misogynistic immigrant culture is the relationship between nationalism, gender, sexuality, and race. National identities, expressed here as ‘American values’ often coalesce around women’s bodies. Racializing sex-subordinating practices allows problematic behavior to be projected beyond the borders of a nation and located on the bodies of racialized immigrant subjects.

(p. 106)

Volpp’s (2000) quote writings illustrates some of the ways that non-white subjects in the U.S., and in this case specifically immigrants, are othered through a process of projection, wherein the white mainstream disavows characteristics of themselves. The difference associated with

particularly Latino culture, therefore, not only others and denigrates that culture, it simultaneously effects an exoneration and lauding of whiteness.

Abu-Lughod (1990) also writes about the use of a discourse of culture to create a distinction between self and other. According to Abu-Lughod (1990) culture is important to anthropology because the anthropological distinction between self and other rests on it. Culture is the essential tool for making other. As a professional discourse that elaborates on the meaning of culture in order to account for, explain, and understand cultural difference, anthropology also helps construct, produce, and maintain it. Anthropological discourse gives cultural difference (and the separation between groups of people it implies) the air of the self-evident. (p. 470)

Abu-Lughod's (1990) insights on the use of "culture" in the field of anthropology resonate with social work's adoption of the norm of cultural competency. Both fields have allied with hegemonic U.S. diversity discourse that reifies differences in the act of naming them, while (re)producing the power differentials that it disavows.

The hierarchy implicit within cultural competency's self-other dichotomy also functions through an implicit idealization of integration into U.S. white culture as the ultimate goal. At times, this idealization is in fact quite explicit. Fong and Furuto (2001), for example, claim that Latino families are more supportive of women's rights when they are more acculturated, but that "for less acculturated families, traditional gender formats will very likely persist" (p.51). In this mapping of acculturation there is an underlying message that adapting to U.S. white culture is more advanced and consequently, preferable. Balgopal (2000) projects similar positive developments for more acculturated families: "Latina Americans often gain a sense of equal partnership with their husbands, take part in larger social networks, and begin using social-

scientific knowledge of child development in raising their children, as opposed to Latino folk wisdom” (p.93). In Balgopal’s (2000) text the idealized U.S. ideals, like “scientific knowledge”, are tied to normative notions of progress and modernity, which stand in contrast to “Latino folk wisdom.” Indeed, Volpp (2000) points out that in social work literature, the ascription of “culture” to immigrants and people of color marks them specifically as less rational than white Americans:

When people of color are assumed to ‘lag’ because they are governed by cultural dictates, their cultural values stand in stark contrast to reason, supposedly a characteristic of the West. The notion that non-Western people are governed by culture suggests they have a limited capacity for agency, will, or rational thought. (Volpp, 2000, p.96)

Balgopal (2000) and Fong and Furuto (2001) ask social workers to participate in encouraging immigrants to adapt to white culture, arguing that the role of the social worker is to support immigrant clients in conducting “a cost-benefit analysis of their acculturation process” in order to “enable them to recognize the value in becoming bicultural” (Fong & Furuto, 2001, p.57). Balgopal (2000) writes that, “social workers must work to reduce the physical and emotional stress associated with acculturation... Coming to the United States is only the beginning of the journey to the enhanced life chances that are possible in the ‘land of opportunity’” (p. 116). These articulations communicate that adaptation to U.S. white culture is the work social workers must support clients in doing, because the immigrant client can access more advanced ways of thinking/seeing the world by doing so.

If immigrant culture is not only essentialized but disparaged, whiteness is not only made invisible and neutral, but valorized. Jeffery (2005), argues that whiteness is often not interrogated



because it might undermine the implicit message that whiteness is linked to a sort of purity. She writes:

the ideology of whiteness is characterized by its unmarked, universal, ‘normal’ qualities, and perhaps most powerfully, its links to innocence and goodness. Critiques of whiteness, whether implicit or explicit, call into question the desirable identity of oneself as a good person, a good and altruistic helping professional. (p. 411)

Importantly, the establishment of a hierarchy between cultures in social work practice literature on working with immigrants and/or people of color operates through a conflation of race and culture that allows the concept of ‘culture’ to stand in for ‘race’ within systemic hierarchies. That is, racial hierarchies that would be abhorrent if articulated explicitly are permitted in discourse because they take on the guise of cultural “differences.” In a very blatant and problematic example of this shuttling between culture and race, Fong and Furuto (2001) state the following about Latin American immigrants in their book: “One of the fascinating aspects of the values of the Latino group is the mixture (mestizaje) that underpins their essence...The genetic mixtures that resulted as the European colonizers mixed with the indigenous peoples of the Americas” (p.50). The authors ascribe a genetic foundation to Latin American culture. Though this example represents a very explicit articulation of the use of the logic of race to describe culture, Park (2005) points out that this conflation underpins much of the deployment of the concept of culture:

That ‘culture’ is conflated with race and ethnicity is conceptually and methodologically dubious; that it is invariably equated with minority races and ethnicities is cause for consternation. Deployed as a synonym for race, the traditional demarcator for difference in US society, and ethnicity, the sophisticated multifarious variant of ‘race,’ ‘culture’

functions in this discourse as a referential demarcator measuring the distance these Others stand in relation to the Caucasian mainstream, inscribed in its turn as the ‘culture-free’ norm. (p. 21)

Thus, the essentializing of culture and the naturalizing of whiteness allow for the persistence and reproduction of institutional racism in social work literature that claims to endorse ‘diversity.’

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated the ways that discourses of cultural competency, acculturation, and multiculturalism revolve around an essentialized narrative about culture that obscures power differentials even as it works covertly to reproduce them. I argue that social work’s glorification of diversity and multiculturalism collaborate with nation-state narratives to consolidate and (re)produce the hegemony of U.S. white culture. In the following chapter I will provide a mapping of some post-structuralist takes on theories of melancholia which, I argue, may provide social workers with a more critical conceptualization for working with Latino immigrant clients: a framework that might provide clinicians with the opportunity to incorporate histories, structural economic and political forces, and simultaneously, specificity and fluidity, into their assessment and treatment of Latino immigrants.

## CHAPTER 4

### Theories of Melancholia

In the following chapter I will review Freud's (1917) theories of mourning and melancholia and discuss how they have been elaborated by post-structuralist, post-colonial, and queer theorists to make sense of how loss may form an integral part of minoritarian subjects' identities -- both individual and collective -- and of the role of regulating norms in the (re)production of loss. It is my hope that this chapter will move beyond a pathological and individualized notion of melancholia and provide the reader with an opportunity to explore the possibility that melancholia is also a productive force that can allow individuals and communities to bring history into the present, keeping alive ideals, experiences and relationships that are under threat of erasure. That it can set the stage for the formation of communities and coalitions by contextualizing individual losses in the framework of systemic forces. This chapter, then, will serve as a foundation for the following discussion chapter, wherein I will apply these understandings of mourning and melancholia to social work practice with Latino immigrants and elucidate how these theoretical constructs can provide social workers with a more politicized and complex understanding of Latino immigrants' intrapsychic and socio-political-economic worlds than is offered by cultural competency and multiculturalist literature. This discussion will argue that the clinical setting is subject to, and participates in the consolidation of, regulating norms that dictate which losses, attachments and subjectivities can be recognized socially. My hope is that these insights will redress the ways in which social work practice has failed to see, ignored,

or negated its own role in the construction of particular, pathologized immigrant identities and the (re)production of colonialist relations of power.

### **Defining Melancholia**

Freud (1917), in his article “Mourning and Melancholia,” describes mourning as a process wherein a person ‘successfully’ grieves the loss of a place, person, thing or ideal by slowly directing the libido that had been invested in the lost object away from that object and towards a new one. Melancholia, by contrast, is described as an individual pathology wherein the subject is unable to invest his or her libido in a new object and consequently internalizes the lost object. Thus the lost object becomes part of the subject’s ego. Freud (1917) writes that “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego” (p. 248), which not only implies an internalization but specifically a haunting or “ghostly identification” (Eng, 2000, p. 1276) arising from the internalization not only of a lost object but of loss itself, installing a certain emptiness within the melancholic ego. Freud describes melancholia as involving a profound ambivalence, due to the “unresolved and conflicted nature of this forfeiture” (Eng & Han, 2003, p. 345). While in his earlier work, Freud (1917) specifically defines melancholia as pathological, in his later work, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), he recognizes that the ego itself is created “through an originary loss predicated on a melancholic incorporation and identification” (Eng, 2000, p. 1277). This understanding of melancholia as productive of the ego – and therefore as an experience shared by all people – was later taken up by Butler (1997).

Butler (1997) uses Freud’s (1917) idea of melancholia to explore the phenomena of heteronormativity and gender production, situating them within the schema of compulsory heterosexuality. Salih (2005) writes that Butler “makes the transition from considering melancholy as a psychic economy to theorizing the production of melancholy as one of power’s

regulatory operations” (p. 244). For Butler (1997) in melancholy, “the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego, as one of its constitutive identifications. The lost object is, in that sense made coextensive with the ego itself” (p. 246). Drawing on Freud’s (1923) later articulation of the ego as specifically a “bodily ego,” (p. 16), Butler (1997) points out that this ego takes on a gendered morphology. Butler (1997) takes Freud (1923) up on his Oedipal narrative, asking how gender may be produced, at least in part, through the repudiation of homosexual desire. Butler (1997) writes,

the girl becomes a girl through being subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs that barred object as a part of the ego, indeed, as a melancholic identification. Thus the identification contains within it both the prohibition and the desire, and so embodies the unrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis. (p.248)

Butler (1997) brings the concept of melancholia into a constellation of power, citing societal power relations -- in this case, compulsory heterosexuality -- as fundamental to its operation. According to Eng (2000), for Butler the “masculine is formed through an identification consolidated by the disavowal of loss” (p. 1277) which begs us to consider how regulatory norms, such as heteronormativity function to bury the very losses that they produce.

Benjamin (1969) utilizes the logic of melancholia to describe a particular relationship to history. His work considers melancholia, then, on the level of society rather than individual psyche. In his (1969) *Theses on Philosophy and History*, Benjamin contrasts the ‘historicist’ approach to history with an approach he deems ‘historical materialism’ (Eng and Kazanjian, 2003, p. 1). Historicism describes an approach to history that attempts to fix its meaning into a hegemonic narrative empathetic with the victor. Thus lost histories, and histories of loss, are eliminated in favor of a singular point of view. Historical materialism, by contrast, “is a creative

process, animating history for future significations as well as alternate empathies,” thus establishing “an active and open relationship with history” (Eng and Kazanjian, 2003, p. 2). Eng and Kazanjian (2003) identify this approach with the formula of melancholia, noting that in Benjamin’s notion of historical materialism, that which is lost is seen as productive, kept alive, and brought into the present as a generative force. This understanding of melancholia as an approach to history brings up the question of the ethical or political implications of a melancholic approach, suggesting that Freud’s (1917) conceptualization of ‘healthy’ mourning might in fact be aligned with the hegemony of dominant or oppressive narratives when considered on the historical stage.

### **Racial Melancholia**

Cheng (1997) takes up the question of the politics of remembrance in history, bringing it into conversation with an understanding of the operation of melancholia in individual psyche, with the question of race and racialization at the forefront. Indeed for Cheng (1997), when considering race, the melancholic relationship to history and loss on the societal and individual level are inseparable. Cheng (1997) points out that the history of racialization in America is a history of legalized exclusions of various ethnic groups, with a simultaneous negation of these very exclusions, which run counter to the American narratives of liberty and individualism. In Benjamin’s (1969) terms, we might say that American cultural memory upholds a ‘historicist’ narrative that misremembers the exclusions and negations of immigrant and minority groups in empathy with the white ‘victors.’ It does this, significantly, through assimilationist demands to eliminate difference, simultaneous to multiculturalist approaches that negate it. This simultaneity of legal exclusion and assimilationist inclusion constitutes people of color as melancholic objects

of American cultural memory, incorporated into the “self” of America through their very exclusion (Cheng, 1997).

But Cheng (1997) goes on to ask whether people of color may not only be the objects, but also the subjects of melancholia. Citing the example of the naturalization process, wherein “one acquires citizenship in a rhetoric of rebirth predicated on self-renunciation (‘Do you swear to give up...’)” (p. 52), Cheng (1997) argues that the longing for inclusion in a state that denies and excludes minorities in order to re-assimilate them, demands a profound self-denial. Whereas the person of color is a melancholic object, renounced by the state, she “is also a melancholic subject, except that what she renounces is herself” (Cheng, 1997, p.53). Cheng (1997) describes the person of color as both a haunting melancholic object, the “ghost” that is incorporated into the state as exclusion, and as a haunted melancholic subject, haunted by that which she must renounce in herself in order to exist.

Eng and Han (2003) elaborate on the functioning of this racial melancholia in their work on the experience of Asian American immigrants. Roughly, Eng and Han’s (2003) take on racial melancholia runs along the lines of the following narrative: in order to be incorporated into the nation-state, immigrants must not only physically leave their countries of origin, but must renounce a whole series of ideals -- “homeland, family, language, property, identity, custom, status” (Eng, 2010, p. 116). In the structure of Freudian ‘healthy’ mourning, the libido invested in these lost ideals, relationships, and senses of home would be redirected towards American ideals and ways of life. Indeed, this is the assimilationist demand of American multiculturalist narratives. But simultaneous to the demand for assimilation, immigrants and people of color are “perpetually consigned to foreigner status and continue to be considered eccentric to the U.S. nation-state,” (Eng, 2010, p. 116), and are thus prevented from achieving full inclusion in

whiteness. Thus, their lost ideals of home and homeland are incorporated into the ego as ambivalent, melancholic objects, unable to be ‘successfully’ mourned because of the impossibility of achieving investment in whiteness as an alternative. Unlike in Freud (1917), then, for whom melancholia arises from an inability to grieve that is individual and pathological, for Eng and Han (2003), the inability to invest in a new object is the result of the operation of institutional power. It occurs on a social as well as a psychic level.

Bhabha’s (1984) concept of mimicry is useful in understanding in more detail the relationship between this demand for self-renunciation -- or the renunciation of cultural ideals -- and imitation of whiteness in order to achieve inclusion. Mimicry describes the way in which “a colonial regime impels the colonized subject to mimic Western ideals of whiteness” (Eng and Han, 2003, p.349). This demand is instituted throughout legal and cultural facets of colonialism including, significantly, official languages. But built into this colonial mimicry is inevitable slippage and failure, the impossibility of actually achieving whiteness even as one must strive to imitate it constantly. The very imitation, in its incompleteness, “serves as a sign of assimilative failure, the failure of authenticity” (Cheng, 1997, p.55), reinforcing immigrants’ and people of colors’ foreigner status.

Consequently, the inability to achieve whiteness subjects immigrants to a double bind, a double loss. Their estrangement from white culture is accompanied by a vexed relationship to belonging within their countries and cultures of origin. This estrangement has multiple sources, the first being that the very act of immigration puts one at a geographical and discursive distance from national belonging in one’s country of origin. Secondly, immigrants’ cultures, identities and countries of origin are subject to ubiquitous, implicit and explicit discursive denigrations in American culture that compromise identification with these objects or ideals. Thus the discourse



of multiculturalism demands assimilation to whiteness via a modality of mimicry that depends on the continual production of slippages, lacks, and failures to achieve whiteness. This situation prohibits immigrants from attaining an uncompromised identification with the countries, cultures, languages or relationships associated with their homelands, on the one hand, or of American ideals of whiteness, on the other. Both, then, must be internalized as melancholic identifications, constituting the individual and collective ego in a way that Eng & Han (2003), Cheng (1997) and others describe as “haunting” (Eng and Han, 2003, p. 347) or “contamination” (Eng and Han, 2003, p. 343), or a “ghostly presence” (Cheng, p. 50).

Furthermore, the very loss of immigrants’ countries and identities is negated as a loss. Certain losses may not be “grieved because they are not, perhaps, even seen as losses but are seen as social gains. These include access to political, economic and cultural privilege; alignment with whiteness and the nation; and ‘full’ subjectivity and sense of belonging” (Eng and Han, 2003, 362). The denial of even these losses forces another ghostly, melancholic incorporation of a loss that cannot be mourned. Kazanjian and Nichanian (2003) write that, “the catastrophic loss is the loss of the law of mourning” (p. 126), which speaks to the multi-dimensional nature of melancholia, wherein loss itself is negated and thus (re)produced.

In addressing the negation of certain losses, Eng and Han (2003) elaborate on the work of Butler (1997), who focuses on the constitutive role of melancholic logic in forming both socially dominant and socially subordinate gender and sexual identities through a negation and denial of certain types of desire. While Eng and Han (2003) share Butler’s (1997) concern with depathologizing melancholia, seeing it as foundational to ego formation, they point out that a distinction must be drawn between the situation of, say, a white heterosexual-identified male and that of a marginalized immigrant, even if both identities might be productively said to be

constituted by loss. “If a system of gender melancholy instantiates compulsory male heterosexuality,” they note

we nevertheless do not typically describe the normative male subject as melancholic or depressed...The loss of the father as object of desire for the little boy can be more acceptably mourned than other losses, for this ‘forfeiture’ has widespread social support and approbation. (p. 362)

Eng and Han (2003) make a critical intervention by calling attention to the importance of “the social and psychic status of that lost object, idealized or devalued” (p. 363). Indeed, Butler (1997) herself argues that “where there is no public recognition or discourse through which such a loss might be named and mourned, then melancholia takes on cultural dimensions of contemporary significance” (p. 137). Eng (2000) argues that the melancholic internalization of these ungrievable losses (re)constitutes the subjectivity of the melancholic as other: “This ambivalent attachment to devalued objects, like *ressentiment*, comes to define -- indeed, to produce -- minoritarian subjectivities” (p. 1278). In thinking about immigrants and people of color, it is important to think about the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of melancholia, wherein the pain of loss is layered and redoubled by the unmentionable, un-recognizable nature of that loss. Put another way, their ego is subject to self-denigration due to loss, and the refusal to recognize this loss as loss (re)produces their alterity.

This emphasis on the importance of the social status of the lost object informs a transition into Klein’s (1987) theories of good and bad objects. This transition gives us more detailed insight into the ways in which social and political forces, acting as regulating norms, take effect intrapsychically. Klein (1987) revises Freud’s (1917) theory of mourning by suggesting that a lost object might be preserved within the psyche by grouping it with all the loved “good” objects

of one's past. This grouping depends on an originary designation of the mother figure as a good object, before she can be split into good and bad. For immigrants and their children, the vexed relationship to cultures of origin may complicate or denigrate their ideas of their "mother," "mother tongue," or "motherland," causing psychic stress because of the threat that these ideals will re-emerge "in the guise of a 'bad' mother" (Eng and Han, 2003, p. 357). Here Eng and Han (2003) refer to a case study of a young, second-generation Japanese American boy who is shamed in class for pronouncing an English word as his mother taught him, thus calling into crisis his image of his mother as a "good" object. In this situation, it is the mother's cultural otherness -- her Japanese-ness itself, that threatens to reconfigure her as a bad object. Eng and Han (2003) argue that this case history demonstrates one way in which "good attachments to a primary object can be threatened and transformed into bad attachments specifically through the axis of race" (p. 360). They go on to propose "the refinement of Klein's theory into an account of 'good' and 'bad' racialized objects" (p. 360). In order to reinstate the shamed Japanese mother as a good object, Japanese-ness itself must be disassociated from the figure of the mother, and from the boy's own identity, "repressed into the unconscious and transformed into a bad object" (p. 360). I would suggest that narratives of multiculturalism create just such a demand, in multiple realms, for the denigration, dissociation, and melancholic repression of cultural identity, not just of the "mother" but of the "motherland" as well. This melancholic installation of cultural identity into the ego demonstrates the way in which racial melancholia may entail a relationship to lost objects -- and hence to oneself -- that is vexed not only by the ambivalence and compromised grievability of these objects, but by their denigration and constitution as "bad" racialized objects.

## **Politicizing Melancholia**

Hence Eng and Han (2003) call attention to the specificity of the experience of minoritarian subjects, pointing out that although melancholia may be understood as a foundational modality of ego formation, the psychic stress, depression, and anxiety associated with these unresolved losses is inextricably linked to the social status of the lost objects and their resultant ability to be recognized as such. Melancholia is asserted here as relational rather than pathological, and as collective rather than individual, its causes rooted in national and international race relations and immigration politics. And here it should be noted that although Eng and Han (2003) write that their work is, “in part, a critical response to the disturbing patterns of depression that we have been witnessing in a significant and growing number of Asian American students” (p. 343), they do not understand racial melancholia, or its naming as such, to be an exclusively disempowering phenomenon by any means. Rather than view the subject of melancholia as damaged or pathological, they argue that melancholia is the psychic outcome of social injustice, emphatically collective, social, and grounded in histories of domination: “Indeed,” they ask, “might we consider damage the intrasubjectment displacement of a necessarily intrasubjective dynamic of conflict” (p. 363)? Similarly, Butler (1997) asks, “Is the psychic violence of conscience not a refracted indictment of the social forms that have made certain kinds of losses ungrievable” (p. 185). Muñoz (1999) proposes an understanding of melancholia

that does not see it as a pathology or as a self-absorbed mood that inhibits activism.

Rather, it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names -- and in our names. (p.73)

Crimp (1989), calling for simultaneous “mourning and militancy” (p. 18), identifies the melancholic ego’s sadness as a militant affect that might be mobilized to fight social injustice. Indeed, Eng and Han (2003) praise the melancholic ego’s militant refusal to “bury the dead,” to allow “socially disparaged objects...to disappear into oblivion” (p. 365). They argue that the preservation of the threatened object might be seen as a type of “ethical hold on the part of the melancholic ego” (p. 365).

Eng and Han’s (2010) case study of a young Korean American woman adopted by a white family provides a further insight into the political potential of an understanding of the operation of racial melancholia. This client displays a virulent hatred towards her Korean mother that is nevertheless tinged with a bit of ambivalent empathy. The client, for example, refers to her Korean mother as a “poor whore” (p. 154), creating some linguistic multivalence within the apparent condemnation through the economic and empathetic double meanings of “poor.” Meanwhile, the client speaks of her white mother with unequivocal praise and adoration. Eng and Han (2010) suggest that there is a sort of splitting of good and bad objects at work here-- occurring along distinctly racialized lines-- where the Korean mother is identified as all bad and hateful and the white mother as all loving and good. Thought of via a Kleinian perspective, this splitting would indicate the client’s need to contain (as a projective identification) her aggressive drive, which she unconsciously fears might destroy the good object (Mitchell and Black, 2006). As in the example of the above-mentioned Japanese boy embarrassed by his mother’s mispronunciation of English words, those parts of the Korean mother that are shorn from her and denigrated are specifically racialized aspects. And here it must be noted again that the projection of negative qualities is not just a projection but a projective identification, wherein the client separates, denigrates and represses the racialized aspects of herself and yet retains a connection

with them, and perhaps some control over them. But this case in particular of the Korean transnational adoptee draws a parallel between the role of race in (re)producing, on the one hand, the psychic difficulty of maintaining the mother as good and bad object (the depressive position), and on the other hand, and the psychic difficulty of maintaining multiple mothers as simultaneously good and bad objects. If the former implies an indictment of the role of racism in compelling the subject to split and de-racialize the image of the mother in order to preserve her melancholically as a loved object, the latter can, perhaps, be understood to imply an indictment of the role of compulsory heterosexuality in compelling the subject to effect a splitting between her two mothers in order to preserve only one as the loved object. Consequently, Eng and Han (2010) seek to simultaneously “rework the binds and bonds of family and kinship that make certain relationships seemingly impossible” (p. 165), and for a therapeutic process that “creates a reparative mechanism through which good and bad can overlap and move across racial divides...[and] begins to address, in more programmatic ways, the profound legacies and difficult histories of racial pain” (p. 165).

Muñoz (1999), too, speaks eloquently about the effort to achieve a reparative position, seeing describing this effort as a collective process:

Melancholia as community process - communal mourning, by its very nature, is an immensely complicated text to read, for we do not mourn just one lost object or other, but we mourn as a ‘whole’ - or, put another way, as a contingent and temporary collection of fragments that is experiencing a loss of its parts. (p. 73)

Not only then does such a melancholic structure allow for the possibility of grieving (racialized) losses in order to move into a reparative position as a “whole” individual whose various experiences and losses can be named and recognized, it also opens up the potential to mourn as a

“whole” community-- and to “resignify... those lost creatures and things that conventional culture and kinship would disavow or bury” (Eng and Han, 2010, p. 165). And indeed, just as Benjamin (1969) calls for the past to be brought into the present, its meanings left open to signification within multiple narratives, Flatley (2008) sees in melancholia a potential for radically re-visioning the world. He writes that “the melancholic state of mind, then, even as it dwells on ruins, on loss, is at the same time liberated to imagine how the world might be transformed, how things might be entirely different from the way they are” (p. 37).

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion and Case Study

In the following chapter I will employ the previous discussion of melancholia to begin to discuss some dynamics of cultural identity that cultural competence theories negate or suppress, and to critique some of the ways in which cultural competence frameworks contribute to the marginalization of immigrant subjectivities and communities. My hope is not to insinuate melancholia as a new, totalizing paradigm that would provide a set of fixed understandings about immigrants to replace those espoused by multiculturalist theories. Instead, I seek to use theories of melancholia to deconstruct the underlying assumptions of multiculturalism and elucidate some alternative ways of conceiving the relationship between power and identity. The following is not an exhaustive analysis of theories of melancholia or of cultural competence or even of the ways in which theories of melancholia could redress the failures of cultural competence, but rather a beginning, and a deliberate effort to model a critical approach. I hope to demonstrate some of the ways that theories of melancholia help us un-learn some of the knowledge we have acquired around practice issues with Latin American immigrants and creatively re-think some very significant clinical issues, insisting on a careful attunement to their sociopolitical and historical context.

In the last chapter I developed a sort of genealogy of theories of melancholia, and highlighted some of the ways that those theories are useful in conceptualizing the complex and vexed relationships that Latino immigrants may have to their identities, highlighting the role of



loss in the production of those identities. What follows is an attempt to extract some of the key features of those theories of melancholia, and to contrast them with methodologies and approaches suggested by multiculturalist frameworks, in order to elucidate ways that we can improve upon clinical work with Latino immigrants. Here I want to make explicit an argument implied by this analytical exercise: that cultural competency serves not only as an approach to clinical learning, but as a theory of identity and difference with its own specific, methodological implications. I undertake the following exercise in critical analysis, therefore, with every effort to hold and identify implications for clinical practice.

There are six attributes of theories of melancholia that I will elaborate on in the following discussion. Melancholia: 1) indicates a ghostly identification with a lost object, wherein the object is internalized into the ego as loss or “haunting”; 2) it demands the maintenance of a relationship to the past within the present; 3) it demands attention to ways in which immigrants’ roles in the United States are constituted as melancholic because of their simultaneous legal/political exclusion and discursive/cultural inclusion within multiculturalism; 4) it allows an understanding of immigrants as melancholic subjects, for whom the self renunciations demanded by the state in exchange for inclusion are experienced as loss and melancholic incorporation; 5) it draws attention to the double bind that immigrants face, created by the impossibility of achieving Whiteness on the one hand or untroubled identification with cultures of origin on the other; 6) melancholia may be conceived of as a productive force or ethical stance that demands remembrance, community action, and radical humility in one’s encounter with others.

### **Case Study: Ana**

In order to clarify the aforementioned attributes of melancholia, which challenge many of the assumptions based in cultural competence and multiculturalist literature, I will incorporate a

case study that exemplifies a multiculturalist approach. The case study is from “The Impact of Multiple Contexts on Recent Immigrant Families” by Marsha Pravder Mirkin. The identified patient is Ana, a 14 year-old Mexican immigrant who came to the United States with her mother, Mrs. B, and two younger brothers two years prior to their engagement with the author, following the sudden, accidental death of Ana’s father. They live with their paternal grandmother, who has resided in the U.S. for five years. Ana is also responsible for caring for her younger siblings while her mother works two jobs and participates in night classes Ana has been referred to therapy because she has begun to be truant at school over the last year and has been sharing her whereabouts less and less with her family. Mirkin (1998) starts by describing this family’s encounter with an initial social worker, whom she critiques for her lack of cultural competence. This social worker had sparked Mirkin’s (1998) condemnation by suggesting that Mrs. B quit one of her jobs and her schooling, so that Ana can enjoy her youth and be less “parentified”. Mirkin (1998) also critiques the social worker for disregarding the role of Ana’s grandmother in the family.

Consequently, Mirkin (1998), as this family’s second therapist, makes the following interventions: 1) Connects the family to a church that has a childcare cooperative that Mrs. B and Ana can utilize so that they can manage their various responsibilities more easily and so that they are more connected to a community; 2) Proposes a familial valorization of Ana’s grandmother as someone who serves as “both the banner carrier for tradition and a clear voice about child rearing” (p.381); 3) Validates the family’s attempts to cope with major life changes as part of a process of mourning loss and developing new relationships; 4) Attempts to “enter the mother’s world, where daughters were expected to assume major household responsibilities at early ages” (p. 381); 5) Characterizes Ana’s actions (her truancy and desire for privacy) as part of a process

of acculturation (“she stayed out late to do what she thought American girls did” (p.381)) that is more rapid than Mrs. B’s. The latter’s adherence to “traditional” cultural values, according to Mirkin (1998), informs an acceptance of gendered norms that privilege young women’s roles in household and child care responsibilities.

Throughout my discussion of the relationships between melancholia and cultural competence theories I will refer to this case study to suggest how an understanding of melancholia might inform a more thorough and nuanced clinical approach to working with Latino immigrants.

### **Melancholia and the Constitution of Identity Through Loss**

Here I will review Freud’s (1923) and Butler’s (1997) applications of melancholia to think about the constitution of immigrant experience through loss. I will argue that their analysis suggest three important interventions with respect to cultural competency and multiculturalist frameworks. These include 1) a focus on processes of identity constitution that calls into question cultural competency’s understanding of identity categories as fixed or authentic; 2) an emphasis on relations of power in those processes of identity constitution that challenges multiculturalism’s depoliticized approach; and 3) an appreciation of the formative role of loss in immigrant experience that complicates simplistic acculturation narratives and offers the possibility of attending to a variety of affective experiences and relationships to one’s identity.

In her adaptation of Freud’s (1923) theory of melancholia into a mechanism of gender production, Butler (1997) removes the implication of pathology from the concept. For her, gender is a political production, constituted through the melancholic incorporation of identities and desires that are prohibited by social norms and legal regulations. As a model for identity constitution, this take on melancholia already makes a critical intervention with respect to the

notions of culture espoused by cultural competency theories. Such theories tend to take the category of culture as fixed. Even their caveats about the possibility of variation, change or fluidity presuppose a core around which variations center (Park, 2005). Thinking about cultural identity through the framework of melancholia, on the other hand, prevents us from taking for granted the category of identity because its whole focus is on identity constitution as a process. Putting the emphasis on construction, on constitution, and on performance avoids the various pitfalls of taking categories of cultural identity for granted.

Furthermore, Butler's (1997) take on melancholia puts relations of power at the center of the analysis of identity, making impossible multiculturalism's uncritical celebration of diversity without reference to power relations. Multiculturalism envisions a nation of distinct but equal cultures, interacting on a neoliberal 'level playing field.' As Sleeter and McLaren (1995) point out, this purported equivalence rationalizes their interaction in a capitalist system through the negation of persistent relations and structures of oppression. For Butler (1997), however, power relations provide the instigation and the whole framework for the constitution of identity. It becomes impossible, then, to think of this identity as fixed -- instead, it is performed and reiterated in every power-laden encounter. Importantly, the clinical setting certainly constitutes one such power-laden encounter. Here we come to understand the crucial importance of Butler's (1997) intervention for clinicians. Rather than focusing on mastery and competence, an attention to theories of melancholia suggests that difference in the clinical setting might be more fruitfully approached through critical attention to the role of power relations in constituting immigrant identity, including, crucially, power relations between clinician and client themselves. An attempt at competence, at mastery may, conversely, reinforce these power relations in its positioning of clinician as "master."

Thinking of melancholia as a fundamental, rather than a pathological mechanism of identity production also centers the concept of loss in our analysis of identity. This in itself is a crucial intervention, because it refutes acculturation theories that envision immigrants engaged in a rational, “cost-benefit” analysis of identification with different cultural ideals. For example, immigrants are understood in social work cultural competence literature as having to trade in some of their culture of origin’s traditions or values for those that are more “American”. This narrative follows the logic of mourning in the sense that the subject is divesting libido from one object and redirecting it to another object. The logic of mourning considers loss as something to be grieved and then moved on from. However, using melancholia to think about immigrant experience draws attention to the affective experience of immigration -- all that must be left behind in order to come to the United States, and all that must be left behind in the ongoing process of acculturation. But what’s more, melancholia reminds us that what is left behind is not only lost, but incorporated into the self as loss. This understanding disrupts the simplicity of the traditional, rational-if-perhaps-stressful acculturation narrative by drawing attention to the persistence of the various lost objects and ideals. But it also brings up a clinically and politically important question about the ramifications of this experience of haunting at the core of identity, both individual and communal.

In the case of Ana, Mirkin (1998) considers Mexican-ness and American-ness as monolithic or fixed, where the loss of one is accompanied by investment in the other following the logic of mourning. Making the logic of melancholia central, on the other hand, insists that we consider and linger upon the specific losses experienced by the family, and their effects. For example, the clinician might endeavor to not take at face value the assumption that Ana’s main goal is to escape her household responsibilities, or that this escape is tantamount to a rejection of

her Mexican-ness. Instead it might be worthwhile for the clinician to explore with Ana what might be complex and contradictory feelings towards the caretaking role, allowing for the possibility that her ambivalence about it might be tied up with a culturally enforced self-denigration and/or rejection of parts of herself. Furthermore, her rejection of her caretaking responsibilities might also come with a concurrent internalization of this role as central to her identity.

Theories of melancholia might also caution the clinician to avoid making assumptions about which values or experiences are coded for Ana's family members as traditional/Mexican versus American. Rather, the clinician should inquire specifically about how the family has made meaning of Ana caring for her siblings, going out with her friends, and being truant. Specifically, Butler (1997) and Eng and Han (2003) remind us that the cultural construction, adoption and naming of a norm is a process that operates in the context and in the service of relations of power. We should ask, for instance, how poverty, proletarianization associated with U.S. neoliberal economic interventions, and ideologies about gender and kinship all operate to constitute childcare as a "normal" role for young women in Mexican culture. Furthermore, how might othering constructions of race be implicated in the projection of this gendered ideology onto Mexican culture, with its concurrent expulsion from American culture? What other countervailing traditions, values or histories might have been suppressed in the constitution of this norm? And how might a more detailed understanding of these political forces allow us to explore with more sensitivity and attunement the complicated feelings Ana and her family must be having towards the negotiation with these norms?

Theories of melancholia also suggest that it might be beneficial for the clinician to consider how their identities are impacting her work with the clients. What, for example, are the

clients choosing to share or not share with Mirkin? How are these things being articulated and how do Mirkin's expectations affect these articulations and their reception? How are Mirkin's (1998) ideas about Ana's family dynamics impacted by gender and cultural norms—both those that she imagines are “American” and/or “Mexican”? What gendered and/or cultural norms are playing out between them in the therapy room? What are the losses that may not be (easily) acknowledged as grievable in the therapy room?

### **Considering the Role of History**

For Eng and Han (2003), the notion of haunting as a part of communal identity is a crucial one. Their work shares with Butler's (1997) an understanding of melancholia not as pathology, but as a defining structure of experience for immigrants, for whom loss -- and the internalization of lost places, experiences, and ideals -- become constitutive of their cultural identities on a collective level. Eng and Han's (2003) turn to Benjamin's (1969) historical materialism underscores their concern with the politics of remembrance and historical narration, emphasizing that immigrant communities carry along with them all the histories of loss that constitute their experience.

The importance of this framework becomes evident in comparison with cultural competency, which refuses discussion of history, individualizing the experience of identity. In the narrative of acculturation, for example, immigrants' encounter with American culture is initiated in the moment of their arrival in the country. The studied omission in this historicist narrative is the impact of U.S. political and cultural imperialism on immigrants for decades prior to their arrival. For Latino immigrants in particular, many of the political and economic causes for their emigration are the direct result of Cold War era political and military interventions by the United States or, in more recent decades, of neoliberal trade interventions. But

multiculturalist celebrations of diversity and cultural competency's acculturation frameworks both forget these decades of interconnectedness, favoring a narrative of immigrant experience that is both ahistorical and depoliticized. Thus, theories of melancholia direct us towards some of the ways that history for Latino immigrants is inexorably connected to -- and sustained within -- the present. This understanding challenges the discrete and ahistorical ways that cultural competence models view culture. It also begs us to consider the larger socio-political-economic histories that have informed immigrants' culture(s) of origin and the causes of their immigration-experiences that are not individual but instead belong to entire communities.

In Ana's case it seems crucial to consider what socio-political or economic issues instigated their migration to the United States – particularly so soon after the death of Ana's father. Are these issues also connected to Mrs. B having two jobs and attending school? Did her relationship to work precede or begin with her husband's death and her migration to the U.S.? How might Ana and her family have been impacted by normative "American" values or culture even while still residing in Mexico? And again, given this historical situation, what political and economic forces might the clinician represent to Ana and her family based on their identities? While Mirkin (1998) characterizes Ana's grandmother as representing and sustaining "traditional" values despite having been in the U.S. longer, how has migrating to the U.S. impacted her and her relationship to Mexican-ness? How has an immigration process likely impacted by U.S. imperialism and an inability for her country of origin to provide her with her basic needs and protections generate vexed relationships to both Mexico and the U.S.? Fortunately, Mirkin (1998) does prioritize connecting Ana's family to a local church, here it seems she is valuing the importance of community and a communal experience. Ana and her family's experience is not an individual one, but instead one that is part of larger systems and



communities of people being impacted by world politics and economic systems. Their losses are losses endured by many, so how might that awareness and/or connection positively impact their relationships to loss and their identities?

### **Inclusion/Exclusion**

Cheng (1997) makes a crucial intervention in the literature on melancholia. Her emphasis on racializing melancholia expands our use of melancholia from the experience of the individual to that of a society or nation-state. Cheng (1997) speaks to the ways that immigrants in the U.S. are melancholic objects of the nation-state, arguing that while immigrants are included in the national discourse on diversity through multiculturalist rhetoric, they are simultaneously excluded by legal and political systems that deem them “illegal,” and by discourses that consider them as persistently “eccentric” to the national identity (Eng, 2010, p. 116). This discrepancy between language and experience is one that indicates the ways that immigrants can be understood as melancholic objects of the nation-state, whose discursive inclusion is always simultaneous to juridical and social exclusion. Thus the immigrant subject exists in the U.S.’s national psyche as a “haunting” -- a melancholic lost object, simultaneously present and excluded. This speaks precisely to the ambivalent nature of melancholia, and elucidates how the simultaneous celebration of immigrant diversity and their negation of rights (re)produces their otherness. And crucially, it demonstrates the complicity in multiculturalist social work literature between its celebration of diversity, on the one hand, and its participation in the alienation of immigrants on the other.

But Cheng (1997) describes immigrants not only as melancholic objects of the state, but as melancholic subjects as well, whose inclusion is predicated on self-renunciation. An example of this notion is the essential Latino immigrant experience of longing for inclusion in a nation-

state that requires that they give up parts of their identity, history, and community in order to be recognized by that nation-state. Thus the immigrant subject is not only a melancholic object incorporated into the state as a ghost of exclusion but also a melancholic subject that must incorporate the constant self-renunciation that is required of her. Again, this racialized understanding of melancholia-- both individual and societal-- offers a critique of cultural competence literature's simplistic espousal of voluntaristic notions of assimilation and acculturation wherein the immigrant subject is a full agent in choosing what parts of which culture they want to identify with. This notion of melancholia also complicates the understanding of these "choices" to assimilate as more or less beneficial and productive. American culture is characterized in multiculturalist literature as allowing for more "modern" ways of being in the world while Other cultures supposedly offer more "traditional" and "authentic" ways of being. And having multiple cultures is to be celebrated as well. But Cheng's (1997) contributions to the literature on melancholia indicate that in fact that every "transaction" in this cultural economy demands repeated self-renunciation, and that the losses sustained are not buried or forgotten, but incorporated. The absence is then a marker of a presence that has been denigrated, and the denigration remains.

In the case of Ana, Cheng (1997) helps us think critically about the de-politicized way that Mirkin (1998) has imagined the process of Ana relating to American culture. While Mirkin (1998) seems to value and appreciate Ana's family's cultural norms, she reproduces their othering by writing that Ana "stayed out late to do what she *thought* American girls did" (p.381 – emphasis added). In this phrasing there is an implicit rhetorical and symbolic distancing between Ana and the American girls within the narration of Ana's desire to be American. Ana's actions are predetermined as mimicry, mandatory but always already doomed for failure. In this

articulation Ana is neither Mexican-enough nor American-enough, reinforcing her alien-ness in this in between space—this limbo—is where immigrants subjects become the melancholic objects of the United States.

Cheng (1997) helps us question the voluntaristic and transactional understanding of cultural identity acquisition, arguing that immigrant subjects are constituted in part by that which they are required to renounce. Consequently, a clinician working with Ana might consider the ways that her contradictory relationships both to her culture of origin and to American culture might produce feelings of angst and/or shame. In an effort to avoid (re)producing those feelings in the clinical setting, the clinician should pay particular attention to the ways that Ana and her family are internalizing the violent exclusions and losses they face daily, and seek to understand the ambivalence and multivalence in Ana's relationship to each culture.

### **The Double Bind**

Eng and Han (2003) have also made significant contributions in racializing the notion of melancholia, thereby allowing us to think of the experience of loss as one that is political, historical, social, and economic. Eng and Han (2003) have creatively utilized post-colonial, post-structuralist, and queer perspectives in thinking about the psychological phenomenon of loss for immigrant subjects. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of their most powerful elaborations on the use of melancholia is its ability to re-conceptualize the acculturation process that immigrants undergo upon arriving in the United States. While within cultural competence literature immigrants are depicted as choosing which parts of their cultures of origin they would like to sustain and which parts of U.S. dominant culture they would like adopt, Eng and Han (2003) point to the inevitable failure that immigrants face in achieving likeness to U.S. dominant culture or Whiteness. They draw upon Bhabha's (1984) theory of mimicry, wherein he describes

the inevitable slippage or failure of a colonized subject who attempts to mimic a colonizer. Bhabha (1984) and later Eng and Han (2003) speak to the demand imposed on the subaltern subject to imitate Whiteness, to accomplish assimilation or acculturation, but also the necessary failure and prohibition that accompanies this demand. Their interventions are crucial in that they highlight that the demand and the inevitable failure are not subject to the success, or even the volition of the colonized, but lie instead in the hands of the colonizers. This underlines once again the role of power in the process of acculturation, and undermines narratives that ascribe uncomplicated or exaggerated notions of agency to immigrant subjects. Thus while immigrants are seen as being able to accomplish American-ness or the “American dream” through their individual volition they are simultaneously set up to fail -- a power dynamic that cultural competence literature fails to acknowledge as it upholds celebrations of diversity and insists upon individual agency.

Even as multiculturalism implicitly valorizes whiteness, however, its validation of immigrant subjectivity is conditioned upon their status as authentic representatives of their cultures of origin. This expectation of authenticity is based on problematic assumptions about the nature of culture, but for immigrants in particular it is thoroughly unachievable. As mentioned in the previous chapter, cultural competency’s expectation of immigrants to represent their cultures of origin is ironic -- perhaps even cynical -- in the face of the implicit denigration of immigrants’ cultures of origin that it perpetuates. Thus immigrants’ experiences of loss of their homelands and of culture are redoubled by the denigration of those lost objects. Because the objects experienced as lost by immigrants are socially devalued, these losses are unable to be seen or validated as loss. Kazanjian and Nichanian (2003) argue that “the loss of the law of mourning” is itself a “catastrophic loss” (p. 126).

These losses are then aggregated and juxtaposed with the loss sustained in the failure to achieve whiteness, constituting the double bind in which immigrants find themselves, wherein access to ideals of whiteness and of cultures of origin are both demanded and yet prohibited, and thus can only be installed within the ego as melancholic objects. Eng and Han's (2003) and Kazanjian and Nichanian's (2003) analysis gives us insight into the political and psychic impact of cultural competency's discourse about authenticity and acculturation. It demonstrates how these narratives not only fail to fully describe immigrant experience -- they themselves play a central role in placing immigrants in an untenable position, as melancholic subjects.

This analysis gives insight into the gravity of Mirkin's (1998) interpellation of Anna's mother and grandmother as the bearers of traditional Mexican culture. Not only does it threaten to decontextualize and obscure the complexity of their experiences, her expectations of authenticity play an active role in constructing the double bind that constitutes them as melancholic subjects. Likewise, Mirkin's (1998) understanding of Anna as seeking further identification with whiteness/American-ness through her friends participates in the creation of this narrative of acculturation, of mimicry -- wherein the demand to imitate, and also the success or failure of the imitation, are all in the hands of the colonizer.

Simultaneously, the creation of a divide between the generations around the subject of acculturation resonates with the experience of the Japanese American child from the previous chapter, for whom his mother was made to represent an outsider and outside culture. For this child, every step towards identification with white, American culture came along with a disavowal and denigration of his mother and the culture identified with her. Mirkin's (1998) narrative about a family whose relationship to acculturation can be understood simplistically along generational lines threatens to reify a similar dynamic for Anna, wherein identification

with white people her age must imply an equal distancing from her mother and grandmother and from those parts of herself she identifies with them.

An effort to enumerate the specific clinical consequences of this analysis would be complicated, particularly given the ubiquity of essentializing and binary notions of culture, but I will offer a few suggestions. Clinicians working with an understanding of racial melancholia might find it useful to pay attention to feelings of failure and/or shame, both of which might be occasioned by the situation of a double bind between identification with two cultures that both remain inaccessible. Secondly, clinicians should resist the identification of certain traits, tendencies, or actions – not to mention people – as characteristic of one or the other culture. Finally, clinicians might find it useful to talk about culture using externalizing narratives. These might allow the clinician and client to avoid essentialist pitfalls, recognize the power of discourse, and allow space for clients to negotiate specific and complex relationships to multiple cultural ideals without the demand for self-denigration.

### **Melancholia as an Ethical Stance**

In the previous chapter, I argued that melancholia may offer insight into an ethical stance towards history and a reparative position for community. By refusing to relinquish attachment to foreclosed possibilities, minoritarian histories, and disparaged loved ones, places and ideals, the logic of melancholia serves as a foundation for holding complexity and contradiction in identity, and for using would-be buried experiences and histories to imagine radically different configurations of the world. I would like to suggest that this ethical stance stands in direct contrast to cultural competency's approach to cultural difference, and that it offers an urgently needed revision of the clinical stance in general.

Melancholia draws attention to the way identity is constituted in reference to that which is outside it, that which is foreclosed, and posits this condition as a fundamental and universally shared element of identity. This interrelation between self and other suggests a sort of instability at the core of selfhood that is a basic condition of being. Butler (2005) takes up the question of this constitution of the self by that which cannot be known to the self, suggesting that it may serve as a foundation for ethics itself. She argues,

we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. (p. 136)

She asks us to “vacate the self-sufficient ‘I’ as a kind of possession” (Butler, 2005, p. 136). This reliance on the intrinsic opacity of the self as a foundation for ethical connection stands in stark contrast to social work education’s insistence on “competence” as responsible engagement. In this way, melancholia might be thought to suggest an embrace of unknowingness as opposed to comprehensive knowledge, a stance of radical humility and curiosity as opposed to mastery.

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