

Undoing the Ties that Bind and Finding New Bonds

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David L. Eng. *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Duke University Press, 2010. 268 pp.

In *The Feeling of Kinship*, David Eng asks, “[w]e have moved beyond structuralist accounts of language, but have we moved beyond structuralist accounts of kinship?” (16). Not only do his investigations reveal the persistence of structuralism in how we think about family and intimate relationships, he also presents an urgent and sophisticated case for the necessity of a poststructuralist account of kinship.

As he notes, poststructuralism destabilizes the relationship between language and representation, and opens up the possibility of understanding identities as constructed. In this book, he delineates a different trajectory between language and identity: for Eng, it is identity that destabilizes language. Eng deploys the concept of queer diasporas to destabilize kinship by undoing the national and sexual ties that bind identity. In so doing, he works towards a retheorization of family and kinship that is “attentive to questions of state formation, racial taxonomies, sexual politics, and globalization” (16). Eng dismantles the structuralist account of kinship by tracking the coequality of race and sexuality in the structuring of intimacy.

As the subtitle of the book suggests, Eng uncovers the relationship between queer liberalism and the racialization of intimacy. Noting the many advances in queer politics in the global north over recent decades, Eng makes a vigorous argument for understanding this progress, and progressive visibility of queer life, in conjunction with the mechanisms through which racism and racial politics are increasingly obscured. As he notes with regard to a 2008 cover of *The Advocate* which asks “Is Gay the New Black?”, there is a sense in which the struggle for racial equality is somehow over when such questions posit gay rights as the “new” struggle. Eng shows the ways in which many of the political victories of queer activism in the last few decades have depended upon the racialization of intimacy.

Eng’s delineation of the racialization of intimacy draws from Lisa Lowe’s work on indenture and intimacy. She observes that the polarization of freedom and unfreedom

obscures the role of Asian indentured labor in the transition from a slave economy to one that relies upon ostensibly free labor. This obscuration, as Eng understands, is part of a larger forgetting of the role of racialized labor in producing the wealth that made the rise of a European bourgeoisie possible. It is this bourgeois class from which notions of intimacy based on the division of private and public spheres emerge. This intimacy has relied, he argues, upon the exploitation of racialized labor from its inception. Eng's theorization of the racialization of intimacy recalls again and again the ways in which this labor remains foundational to the very notion of the private sphere upon which some of the biggest gains of queer liberalism have been made.

This relationship between the racialization of intimacy and queer liberalism emerges with particular clarity in Eng's discussion of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on *Lawrence v. Texas*. Reading Justice Kennedy's majority opinion for *Lawrence*, Eng notes that much of the commentary on the decision has overlooked the fact that the plaintiffs in the case were a mixed race couple. Lawrence's neighbors called the police to investigate Lawrence's home not because they suspected that consensual sodomy was taking place, but rather to report an unidentified black man on the property. For Eng, "[i]t is this enduring and unresolved history of whiteness, private property, and black racial trespass that provides the material and ideological background through which the queer liberalism of *Lawrence* emerges" (36). He asks, "[h]ow is it, then, that what begins as a story of racial trespass can end as a narrative of queer freedom?" (36). In proceeding to answer this question, Eng highlights the way in which the obscuring of racial issues underwrites the burgeoning visibility of queerness in a liberal society.

Despite the temptation to think of the victory embodied in *Lawrence* as analogous to the progress made in *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Loving v. Virginia*, Eng cautions against such moves. In so doing, he outlines what is at stake in queer liberalism as he defines it: "queer liberalism is... about failing to recognize the racial genealogy of exploitation and domination that underwrites the very inclusion of queers and queers of color in this abstract liberal polity" (45). Eng's careful reading of the relationship between *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Lawrence v. Texas* reveals the imbrication of race and sex in the construction of freedom in the United States.

Eng does not only insist upon the racialization of intimacy; he also reorients notions of familial intimacy through an incisive examination of the concept of origins. In so doing, he questions and displaces the Oedipus complex as the central organizing paradigm of kinship. In his discussion of Wong Kar Wai's film, *Happy Together*, Eng posits a wholly different story of origins, kinship and language than that of Oedipus. The film examines the attempts of two lovers from Hong Kong to "start over." As Eng brilliantly observes, the phrase "start over" in Cantonese is a colloquialism, one

uttered by one of the lovers in the film, “that translates literally as ‘from the head over again’” (85). Exploring this deeply corporeal and cerebral notion of origins in relation to the incest taboo, Eng offers a poststructuralist account of kinship through the concept of starting over. Displacing the privileging of heterosexual desire as the structuring story of loss and psychic development, and refusing the Oedipal as inevitable, Eng suggests that the lovers in *Happy Together* illuminate an alternative structure of family and kinship. It is a powerful, sophisticated reading that opens up the notion of origins as a problem of the future as much as it is of the past.

Eng further examines this possibility of a different story of origins, and the necessity of displacing the Oedipal narrative, in two chapters on transnational adoption. Through a reading of Deann Borshay Liem’s 2000 documentary, *First Person Plural*, Eng reveals the ways in which transnational adoption demands a poststructuralist engagement with kinship and family through the possibilities of two mothers. Looking at the ways in which race is under erasure in terms of the refusal to see racial difference (the insistence that the transnational adoptee is just the same as everyone in the adoptive family) and in terms of the outsourcing of reproductive labor, this chapter attends to transnational adoption as an increasingly important field of study through race and psychoanalysis. Eng argues for a poststructuralist reordering of psychoanalysis that accommodates the possibility of two mothers. He extends these concerns and this reading in a subsequent chapter written in collaboration with Shinhee Han on the case history of Mina, a Korean transnational adoptee. This chapter complements his previous collaboration with Han in “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia.” Eng and Han push Melanie Klein’s work on splitting and idealization into the terrain of race and racialized mothers. In a creative rereading of the possibilities of Kleinian envy, they suggest that envy might function reparatively, allowing psychic space for both the Korean and the adoptive mother. It is a process that reworks the heterosexual and white presumptions girding structuralist accounts of kinship and family in such a way that those presumptions must give way.

The book closes with a consideration of the relationship between affect and language in Rea Tajiri’s documentary, *History and Memory*. In his reading of Tajiri’s story of a mother who has history but no memory, and a daughter who has memory but no history, Eng shows that memory works with affect in order to grant new significations to historical objects. In this way, affect is itself a form of history. Eng reveals the ways in which this affect, the feeling of kinship, responds to new forms of filial connection and social formations.

This is a brave book that demands its reader rethink the ties that bind.

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