Post-Migrant Subjectivity and Secondary Loss: 

Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club*

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1. Introduction

Second generation immigrants, or post-migrant subjects—i.e., subjects growing up in a different country than that of their parents—are likely to encounter a series of complex issues as they embark on exploring their origins.1) Obviously one could say that anyone trying to find his or her origins or ancestral roots is likely to face a number of both concrete and more abstruse difficulties: but for the post-migrant subject, the problem is necessarily enhanced due to the oftentimes immediate lack or absence of factual, verifiable information. It is possible that, in some cases, parents and older relatives may be able to bridge parts of the gap, fill in some of the details, but the information about their ethnic origins often remains, in a very literal sense, second-hand information. While first generations of immigrants

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1) I will use the term “post-migrant” throughout this article to stress—less the generational aspect (as in “second generation”)—and more the experience of coming after something; of living in the shadows of someone else’s (migrant) experiences.
typically have their own characteristic set of issues to cope with—such as learning a new language, getting a foothold in a new world, and ensuring that their children receive an education—the second generation often grow up facing a more ambiguous set of problems about belonging, roots and identity.\textsuperscript{2)}

In the following, I want to explore this ambiguous set of problems through a discussion of Sigmund Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” and Amy Tan’s novel \textit{The Joy Luck Club}. Reading Freud’s essay critically, I will attempt to develop a notion of melancholia which is less related to the process of unresolved grief and loss, and more a practice of performativity and creativity. This perspective forms the background against which I will attempt to read Amy Tan’s novel as a “post-migrant” novel. Tan’s novel narrates the intricate story about the relationship between first generation individuals, who emigrated from China to America, and their children who are coming of age. The children, or, the post-migrant subjects, are situated in an ambiguous position—torn between a desire to fully integrate, and a desire to know more about those aspects that mark their difference, but which also connect them most intimately to their parents, and their parents’ past. On the one hand, the post-migrant subjects in Amy Tan’s novel are possessed by an excessive sense of gratitude—the overwhelming desire to pay tribute to their parents’ sacrifices and losses; on the other hand, they feel an equally strong need to claim a position of independence, a space of self-identity. How this ambiguous subject-position is dealt with and resolved in the novel, I argue, is intimately connected to melancholia—as a creative and performative way of coming to terms with a loss which, in a strict sense, belongs to someone else.

\textsuperscript{2)} See Bromley (2000): 142.

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