Identity in Question

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Melancholic Identities: Post-traumatic Loss, Memory and Identity Formation[1]

— Jeffrey Prager —

Introduction: On trauma, loss, and afterwardness

This past century has been especially violent and destructive. World history knows no parallel both for the scale of horrors inflicted and for the awareness by humans of their own potential for destruction. Contemporary thinkers have struggled to capture the depth and enormity of this reality, especially the effect on human beings of the knowledge of their own capacity to destroy. In describing a century-long production of violent assaults on human populations (e.g., world wars, genocides, massive dislocations and nuclear threat and destruction), writers underscore the pervasiveness of a 'sense of trauma' (Agamben, 1999; LaCapra, 2001; Levinas, 2001). Focusing on the experience of those living through these events, both their being overwhelmed by its enormity and incapable of fully absorbing its impact, many suggest that human experience itself has been transformed by the unique scale of events and the potential for danger to which people are aware and to which they have been subjected.

Trauma – a psychologically-inflected term implying an order of experience to which individuals are incapable of fully assimilating – has entered the lexicon to explain the damage to humankind caught up in the vortex of its capacity to destroy. This pervasive sense of trauma describes the distinctiveness of this past century and the perhaps irreparable toll it has taken on the individuals living under its shadow. It is invoked to capture events so monumental as to be beyond the capacity of individuals either to fully absorb, comprehend or control. This language, originating with Freud, now dominates the contemporary imagination, extending beyond an individual's narrative of traumatic personal experience to now include an account of socio-political events of great magnitude that have swept up whole populations and that continue to exert influence.

Trauma, too, has come to orient many contemporary nations' efforts to reconcile today's population to their brutal pasts. It not only acknowledges the range of atrocities that have been inflicted on human beings over the past century, but also their characterization as traumatic reflects keener attention to the short- and long-term suffering incurred by its victims. Traumatic histories of nations have generated interest in a new set of social questions, no less relevant to collectivities as to individual persons: whether it is either possible or desirable for survivors of trauma to forget the various horrors they have lived through, of trauma's legacy over time, of social memory, and of the quest for reconciliation and the possibility of forgiveness.

Now, early on in this new century, understanding *the causes* of war, genocide, plague and terror – scholarship that brackets out from consideration its impact on those individuals who find themselves at the centre of trauma's path – is being overshadowed by an interest in how people within nations, both victims and perpetrators alike, comprise themselves in the aftermath of death and destruction. What has emerged, case by case, is greater attention on how best to reconstitute community in the face of these overwhelming experiences, how to engineer reconciliation. The intellectual landscape concerned with political and social conflict, now charged with these sets of moral quandaries, is dominated by both empirical studies and philosophical and theoretical examinations detailing the ways in which various agencies representing their collectivities attempt to respond to their pasts and to deal with their particular history of violence and trauma (see, for example, Barkan, 2000; Cohen, 2001; Minow, 1998; Thompson, 2002; Torpey, 2006).

The aftermath of the Holocaust probably continues as the paradigmatic case to explore these outer edges of political, social and moral dilemmas defining both the limits of the representation of evil and the enduring traumatic legacy both for survivors and their descendants. Yet there is no dearth of examples through which the problem of traumatic pasts has come to preoccupy scholars: the AIDS epidemic and the question of mourning; the ethnic and religious wars in Eastern and Central Europe and the emergence of international tribunals of human rights; post-apartheid South Africa and the implementation of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and debates over reparations; the killing fields of Cambodia, Peru, Columbia and civil wars in Central America and efforts there at social repair; dictatorships in the Southern Cone of Latin America and various policies of official forgetting, memorializing, and publicly remembering the disappeared, imprisoned and exiled.

Before this recent turn to issues of trauma and its aftermath, identity, whose interest emerged from the politics of the 1960s, had been thought of almost exclusively along a horizontal axis, where social actors, often willfully and willingly, define themselves or are defined by others in relation to others co-existing in time and space. Individuals have tended to group themselves, to identify, topographically as belonging to one group, existing in relation to others. In the United States, Italian-Americans co-exist with, say, Irish-Americans and African-Americans, each standing in relation to White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (those who lay claim to no specific ethnic identity), or Catholics distinguish themselves from Protestants and Jews and together comprise the vast majority of American citizens. Similarly, those who identify themselves as gay understand themselves as living together in a world of others who define their sexual orientation as straight, together more-or-less making up the sexual population of the nation. Identities such as 'Asian American' or 'West Indian', or 'Hispanic' reveal clearly this contingent character of identity – where the temporal plane of a nation divides populations into socially-constructed categories that come to be adopted by those so designated. To be an Asian or a West Indian in the USA or in the United Kingdom may reflect the social organization of ethnicity in these countries – a mapping across a plane of artifactual ethnicities more than it captures common affective links between, say, Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese, for example, or Bermudans, Guyanese, and Trinidadians. 'Asianness' or 'West Indianness' of course are realities only in a political-cultural environment where finer distinctions between groups are of no consequence. Nonetheless, these designations over time have produced those who identify themselves (especially by second and third generation immigrants) vis-à-vis others as Asian Americans, and both in the USA and in the UK as West Indians.

Up to this point, interest in identity has focused largely on describing the intense affective attachments created between self and others, where common ties of kin, blood, political and sexual orientations, religious beliefs and other categories implying 'likenesses' are imagined or constructed to crystallize, to demarcate, and to oppose other groups. In the USA, especially, but elsewhere as well, identity has become a basis and rationale for collective action – what Brubaker and Cooper (2002: 4) have called 'categories of practice', 'used by "lay" actors in some … everyday settings to make sense of themselves, of their activities, of what they share with, and how they differ from others'. Identities and memories, as J.R. Gillis (1994: 5) notes, are not things we think *about*, but things we think *with*. Movements toward 'ethnic cleansing', whether in Serbia, in Rwanda, or in India express at their extreme their disastrous potential to mobilize action, oftentimes of a brutal kind.

'Identity politics', in sum, has served as a cognitive map for actors to orient themselves toward others and for commentators to explore conflict at home and across the globe (see Calhoun, 1994). It is what Axel Honneth (1996) characterizes as 'the struggle for recognition', providing, again both to actors and scholars, a new grammar to explain the intersection of social identity and social conflict. Charles Taylor in *The Sources of the Self, The*

Making of Modern Identity (1997)underscores identity's synchronicity – the in-the-present division of the world by identity groups – when he defines identity as 'the self in moral space' in which individuals more or less consciously situate themselves in the present, thereby to orient themselves to an ideal future. Taylor demonstrates the significance of modern identity for persons orienting their actions vis-à-vis other 'identity groups' co-existing with one another, each defining social action with respect to a particular moral vision of a world-in-the making.

Our contemporary preoccupation with what I refer to as the condition of 'afterwardness', or the challenges posed to reconstitution in the face of both personal and social tragedy, also implicates considerations of selfhood and identity. But it has done so in a decidedly different fashion. In addition to identifying trauma as an experience whose consequences persist through time, Freud (1954d: 356) alerts us to the imprecise and constructed character of its remembering, the impossibility of the 'pure' retrieval of experience. He employs the term *nachtraglichkeit*, sometimes translated as 'deferred action', to describe how traumatic experience comes to be remembered later, after the fact, and, as a result, is necessarily subject to the distortions that inhere both from memory and desire: the imprecision of our capacity to recollect and our own psychological investments in what about the past we want to believe (see also Green, 2002; Thoma and Cheshire, 1991). 'Afterwardness' has posed for social actors and commentators alike different questions of identity, ones that are now decidedly more historical and psychological. There is now far greater interest in identity's diachronic relation to its past, less to its contingent in-the-present character, (i.e., the social construction of identity), and more to the ways in which past experiences appear to 'hard-wire' or determine categories of identity. The genealogy of identity – the process by which individuals vertically place or imagine themselves into ongoing social categories of experience and construct their own understanding of themselves in relation to these categories – has taken the topic in some ways full circle back to its origins, to the work of Erik Erikson (1985 [1950]) who first named identity as a stage in an individual's psycho-cultural development and, ultimately, back to Freud himself who, while never referring directly to identity, at times was keenly aware of the mechanisms of identification.

Freud explicitly links identification – and ultimately identity – to the experience of loss. A child's early experience of fusion between self and other necessarily gives way both to individual differentiation or separation and an emotionally persistent yearning for a return to a sense of oneness with others: the life-long dialectical search for a balance between autonomy, differentiation and independence, on the one side, in the midst of impulses for connection, fusion, and dependence with others, on the other. What Freud describes is a process, one which largely operates below the surface of

awareness, in which, to ward off feelings of abject loss and abandonment, individuals internalize these lost others – in the first instance, our parents from whom emotional separation becomes required – into a sense of who we are as individuals. In this regard, gender identity, sexual identity, and ethnic identity, for example, derive from similar interpersonal processes of loss and differentiation, though gender and sexual identity develop earlier in personality development and operate deeper beneath the conscious surface than other forms of self-representations such as religious, regional, and racial identity. Individuals take for themselves aspects of those they feel most attached to and from whom it is necessary to separate. Identity therefore constitutes a largely unconscious mechanism of recording and retaining in-the-present, after-the-fact aspects of those who are loved but, from the perspective of once having been enveloped by them, who no longer survive in the same way. This process of internalization/identification allows for the loosening of an eroticized attachment to these people and enables us to direct that emotional focus outward and toward others. Internalization and identification occur, of course, only over time as the individual registers and processes the experience of loss. Afterwardness, framed by both memory and desire, describes the basis upon which self-formation and character development, contending with the crisis of an all-encompassing world giving way to the painfulness and difficulties of individuation, occur.

Identity and internalization thus require an understanding of the processes by which individuals psychologically respond over time to loss: how is identity related to past experience and in what ways are individuals capable of altering identity? Are some identities malleable? Or does the history of loss become the source for timeless identifications in the present? Can history be freed of its obligation to provide the basis for living presently? Moreover, because of the prevalence of traumatic loss – experiences in which the world as it had been known is violently extruded from the self – are some losses incapable of being overcome, where a sense of trauma defines a person's relationship to his or her past, where mourning loss can never overcome a melancholic holding on to it? This 'backward-looking' interest in identity formation has generated new interest in a distinctive form of identity, a melancholic one, and it has placed Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1954c [1917]) and his *The Ego and the Id* (1954a [1923]) centre stage in theorizing the relation between losses experienced (ones that might include terror and trauma) and identity-formation. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud writes 'mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on' (1954c [1917]: 243). Now in today's political cultural milieu preoccupied with the sense of trauma and social repair, the concept of loss and its role in identity-formation, especially as it refers to the loss of 'country, liberty, an

ideal' serves as a companion concept to that of trauma and its aftermath: remembering losses melancholically, those incurred in the past through traumatic violations of the self, becomes the foundation for identity-formation in the present.

Melancholia has emerged as a key category not only in the analysis of individuals but also of whole communities and nations as well. Yet as I will argue, there is danger in conflating melancholic community – a social category describing a collectivity defined in some sense by its history of traumatic losses – with an individual suffering melancholia – a clinical description of an individual who suffers a form of psychological distress as Freud defines it. As melancholia has increasingly been invoked to describe members of groups who live with a memory of their traumatic origins, there has been a concomitant tendency to treat as acceptable (even desirable) personal identities forever bound to their communal pasts. Too often personal identity reduces exclusively to the nature of the community that spawns it and, as a result, treats both the self and the question of identity as an extension of the current narrative of the social conditions that generated the collectivity. Identity is both thoroughly historicized and narrativized, even politicized: the individual tends not to be treated as more than the social conditions under which he or she was produced. In spite of a heavy reliance upon Freud's melancholia, there is ironically a propensity to overlook the psychological life of individuals, influenced by the world but not identical to it and, moreover, to overlook the debilitating effects that, as Freud explained it, melancholia holds for an individual's capacity to engage life.

Melancholy has both been invoked to introduce subjective states into social analysis, 'the sense of trauma', and defended, *contra* Freud, as an embodied form of remembering. As David Lloyd (2003, 217) writes in *The Memory of Hunger*, a study of the memory of the Irish Famine among contemporary Irish, the modern postcolonial subject ought to develop a 'nontherapeutic relation to the past, structured around the notion of survival or living on rather than recovery'. For Lloyd, a nontherapeutic relation to the past means that an overcoming of the past – its erasure or supercession – ought not be the aim of present day living. Instead, 'damage itself becomes the locus of survival, the pained trajectory of what lives on' (2003: 216). Melancholia is synonymous with remembering, and traumatic loss rightly becomes a more-or-less conscious feature of contemporary identity.

This new interest in melancholia, and the claim that it is constitutively linked to identity in this age of trauma and ought to be in some fashion preserved, differs dramatically from its more conventional usage in social analysis, one forged most famously by the German psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in *The Inability to Mourn* (1975). In this influential book, published originally in German in 1967, the Mitscherlichs sought to understand the enduring impact of the Second World War on the post-war German population. Based largely on a reading of Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, they argued that Germany, struggling with a deep sense of collective responsibility, guilt and shame, sought to break all 'affective bridges to the immediate past' (1975: 26). Thus, the powerful love and hope that most Germans had invested for a time in their Nazi leaders and the 'fantasies of omnipotence' (1975: 23) that were mobilized in support of the war effort were powerfully dashed. The loss and disappointment marked by Germany's defeat had gone largely unacknowledged and, therefore, unmourned. Forgetting the past, the Mitscherlichs argued, was a defensive strategy by the German people to prevent a melancholic holding-on to their shameful past but which served, as well, to make impossible mourning the losses experienced at the hands of the Allied powers. Melancholia, characterized by a profound devaluation of oneself, was averted by this refusal to mourn. But – and this was the central thrust of the Mitscherlichs' analysis – the result was a 'psychic immobilism' (1975: 27) in which Germans felt incapable of confronting the many serious social and political problems that were then confronting them. Both melancholia and mourning were consciously staved off, but only by those members of German society who were denying historical continuity with their past. Defensive denial, on the other hand, sapped the German population's capacity to invest necessary energy to solve the problems of post-war German society.[2]

In *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), Paul Gilroy builds upon this tradition of social analysis pioneered by the Mitscherlichs. Employing Freud's concepts of mourning and melancholia, he describes how members of contemporary Western societies have succeeded in repressing the brutalities of colonial rule that were 'enacted in their name and to their benefit'. The result has been the creation of a pathological political culture dominated by fear of the immigrant, anxiety over multiculturalism, and a yearning for a romanticized past when the nation putatively was culturally 'pure'. As the real past of colonial violence has been denied and the end of empire insured, in its place has been produced a 'postimperial melancholia'. Melancholia for Gilroy describes contemporary Western political cultures, results from a process of denial of brutality and a severing of the present from the past, and, similar to the argument in *The Inability to Mourn*, undercuts the capacity of a current generation from engaging the world fully – what Gilroy describes with respect to racial and ethnic diversity as multicultural conviviality – and with enthusiasm. It hypostatizes identities based upon race and immigration, preserving in place categories of affiliation based upon past histories of those who occupied the centre, and those from the periphery.

Both in the analysis of the Mitscherlichs' and of Gilroy's, following Freud's seminal essay, melancholia is a pathological condition, one from which recovery is possible, albeit difficult. Remembering, and acknowledging one's

own relation to the past – recognizing the psychologically-fraught experience of loss – promises the possibility of no longer being wholly constrained by it. Melancholia may be avoided, self-devaluation prevented, and creativity and enthusiasm engaged with the overcoming of defensive denial and the capacity developed to acknowledge and to accept responsibility, in these cases, for the crimes of the past. Contemporary identities need not be forever determined by past social affiliations: loosening the hold of melancholic attachments to the past describes the political projects for both the Mitscherlichs' and for Paul Gilroy. Only by recovering the past and knowing one's personal relationship to it, they imply, will this generate the possibility for a less unencumbered future. Both in the case of post-war Germany and in postcolonial Western societies, the authors offer a cultural and political critique, insisting that melancholia is a psychological condition that might be avoided. Each of their social analyses is intended to describe the societal mechanisms necessary to achieve personal and cultural healthiness. The Mitscherlichs and Gilroy each argue that for members of a society to know and remember loss and to overcome a defensive denial of the painful experiences that encourage not knowing (i.e., to make the unconscious conscious) are keys to melancholy's prevention. They hold out the possibility that despite the traumas of the past the present need not remain forever its victim.[3]

In contrast, there has recently emerged a new assessment of melancholy and the possibility, even the advisability, of it being avoided as a permanent condition of individuals in the contemporary world. In the Afterword to a recent collection of essays entitled *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, that included David Lloyd's essay discussed above, Judith Butler (2003: 468) writes 'loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community *cannot* overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community'. Butler's claim here adumbrates the larger project of the collection of articles of which her contribution is a part; namely, an assertion of both the reality of a 'melancholic identity' and a valorization of 'melancholic history'. The editors of *Loss* (Eng and Kazanjian, 2003: ix) reacting against conventional Freudian and neo-Freudian readings, write 'instead of imputing to loss a purely negative quality, the essays in this collection apprehend it as productive rather than pathological, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary ... the pervasive losses of the twentieth century are laden with creative, political potential'. In 'A dialogue on racial melancholia', David Eng and Shinhee Han (2003: 353) recast Freud's insistence on the debilitating effects of melancholy and seek to 'depathologize' its understanding. Rather than portraying it as a damaging psychic feature, they suggest that it expresses rather a productive conflict within the individual. In the case of Asian Americans, the subject of

their essay, melancholia describes the healthy tension between efforts toward assimilation and the preservation of racialized difference within the American body politic. This new valorization of melancholia as a form of preserving lovingly a connection to one's traumatic past generates a different understanding of Freud's essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1954c [1917]). No longer interpreting Freud as offering an analysis of two discrete psychic processes – mourning and melancholia – Eng and Han suggest instead that the two exist on a continuum, and a healthy postcolonial identity consists in the capacity to live with the tension between the two. 'The material and psychic negotiations of these various issues', they write, 'are conflicts with which Asian Americans struggle on an everyday basis. This struggle does not necessarily result in damage but is finally a productive and a necessary process' (2003: 364). Eng and Han situate their argument (2003: 366) within a larger political project of 'living melancholia', and, invoking the writings of the gay activist Douglas Crimp who, in the face of the AIDS epidemic, writes of 'mourning *and* militancy', conclude their essay with a call for 'mourning *and* melancholia'. Not only do they misread Crimp, an argument that I will develop shortly, but in so doing they distort Freud and underestimate melancholia's capacity to paralyze.

The essays in *Loss* and the more general renewed interest in melancholia as a component of contemporary identity are aimed largely to preserve memory and to insure that traumatic losses in the past are not forgotten. As politics, melancholia is invoked to prevent erasure and supercession, to preserve memory and accountability. Yet in their effort to normalize melancholia, there is a danger of misreading Freud and even to distort contemporary writers who struggle, like Freud, to preserve the difference between the repression of traumatic pasts, on the one hand, that results in it repetitively being recreated in the present and, on the other, mourning the past in service to it being overcome (see also Freud, 1954d [1895]). These authors' celebration of melancholia in which the contemporary subject is forever in the shadow of the lost object and their disinclination to demarcate melancholia from healthy mourning deprive us of one of Freud's most important insights: traumatic loss has the ability to promote in individuals an 'incapacity for living'. Melancholia insures that the present is lived *as if* it were the past, when the present is experienced as less vivid and meaningful than an earlier time, and when the individual is dominated by an 'internal psychical reality' that takes precedence over the reality of the external world (Freud, 1954b [1939]: 76) As Todorov (2001) has argued, mourning is a way of disabling memory, while melancholia disables individuals from living currently. Even in the face of traumatic losses, mourning is (perhaps) nonetheless possible and the past need not be indelibly destined among its survivors to reach the precipice of paralysis.

The significance of these issues, of course, powerfully redounds on efforts at social repair in various settings around the world. By detailing the conditions

necessary for mourning to successfully occur and for the circumvention of melancholia, it is possible to consider ways to weaken existing identities too powerfully tied to past loss, too insistent on experiencing the present time-lessly, *as if* it were the past (Prager, 2006b; Prager, 2008).

Identity and loss

In a poignant and courageous essay written in 1989, during a particularly bleak moment of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, gay activist Douglas Crimp published *Mourning and Militancy* (2002). It is an essay about the grief suffered by a whole community of gay men due to the extensive losses suffered to AIDS death and – especially in a society unsym-pathetic to homosexuality – about the difficulties of moving beyond deep sorrow. While Crimp concludes by advocating the need for those who have experienced these losses to both mourn those deaths *and* to be politically militant, the essay in fact is a powerful argument *against* the conflation of mourning and militancy. Ours is a culture that because of its homophobia interrupts the process of mourning, Crimp insists, and the result has been a political militancy inspired by a defensive reaction against this unnatural suppression of personal grief. There are ample grounds for gay activists to be militant in an American society that, certainly in 1989, failed to acknowl-edge gay subjectivity and therefore largely overlooked the devastating losses suffered, Crimp argues. But, nonetheless, the basis for a militant politics needs to be established not defensively but rather freely and unencumbered, independent of a tendency to deny personal grief through politics.

The title of his essay, *Mourning and Militancy*, acknowledges Crimp's debt to Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, and it is largely on the basis of Freud's discussion that Crimp developed his arguments. Freud (1954c [1917]: 244) describes grieving as a process in which the loss of a loved object results in 'turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of him', and that only slowly releases the hold that the lost-object has over the survivor. 'It is easy to see', Freud continues, 'that this inhibition and cir-cumscription in the ego is the expression of an exclusive devotion to its mourning, which leaves nothing over for other purposes or other interests'. But as Crimp notes, Freud (1954c [1917]: 243–4) recognizes the debilitat-ing and harmful psychological consequences when mourning the loss of someone is interfered with. When this occurs – as in the case of the preva-lent societal interdiction against homosexuality – pathological mourning may well result. Freud describes this as an inability of the griever to both gradually recognize and acknowledge loss and simultaneously over-time to accept natural and inevitable ambivalent feelings toward the lost object. In the face of this harmful interference with the mourning process, where

death by AIDS in a homophobic culture provides no place or space for grieving, gay militancy emerges as a symptom of pathological mourning. Here Crimp reads into the mourning process the formative role of discur-sive forms and practices (homophobia) that configures the social field and profoundly impacts subjectivity: militancy, in defiance against a rejecting external world, becomes a conscious defense against grief and deference to homophobes. It is a form of acting-out.

Yet Crimp, again following Freud, acknowledges that mourning is also a psychic process, subject to unconscious forces within the griever existing independently of societal interdiction. Militancy may well also serve as a conscious defense against unconscious ambivalences to the death of a loved one, an outcome of one's own antagonism to mourning. 'We must recog-nize', Crimp writes, 'that our memories and our resolve also entail the more painful feelings of survivor's guilt, often exacerbated by our secret wishes, during our lovers' and friends' protracted illnesses, that they would just die and let us get on with our lives' (2002: 138–9). Like all defense mechanisms, militancy here constitutes an ego function designed to ward off the surfac-ing of an unconscious ambivalence to the death of others. These ambivalent feelings toward lost objects oftentimes overlay societal prohibitions with purely psychic ones: in identifying the role that defense plays in the mourn-ing process, Crimp offers a more nuanced appreciation of individual psy-chology independently contributing to pathological mourning.

Crimp's aim, it is clear, is not to condemn militancy but rather, by uncou-pling it from defensive reactions to loss, to allow for its full-blown and authentic flourishing. The authentic militant doesn't forget the past, but by engaging politically he or she remembers losses suffered in the name of a bet-ter present. Militancy – or, should we say, a gay militant – needs to emerge, to paraphrase Freud, both from the shadow of his dead objects (real loss) and from the guilt of the ambivalences felt at having survived and now permit-ted to live. 'When the work of mourning is completed', Freud writes, 'the ego becomes free and uninhibited again' (1954c [1917]: 245). Or, as Crimp might say, militancy – an unencumbered one – becomes a possibility when it is not simply in the service of warding off and denying painful affect.

In thinking anew about the question of identity, the significances of Crimp's essay are many. First, and in contrast to many contemporary writ-ers, Crimp resists a tendency to read Freud only as a treatise on the power of the psyche, and the self that emerges only a result of the struggle that occurs between impulse and defense. In the more conventional reading of Freud, external reality exists only as a background to the powerful psychic forces at play in each individual, and identity is viewed largely as an *intra-psychic* achievement. Identity is a product of the internalization of the lost object, a force that unconsciously comes to stand like a garrison army guard-ing to forever preserve the memory of the loved one. In a homophobic culture

unwilling to cooperate in a mourning process for those who died from AIDS, Crimp reminds us that the potential among the mourners for a free and uninhibited ego to emerge is compromised by an external world intent on colluding in forms of defensive denial. Crimp documents how *Mourning and Melancholia* possesses within it a framework to understand the complex relationship between the social world and the psychic one, without reducing one to the other. His analysis demonstrates an important, and underappreciated, feature of identity, applicable to the phenomenon more broadly: identity is *inter-psychic*, resulting from the confrontation between a dynamically structured individual and a social world replete with expectations and pre-figured formulations about the self. The mourning process requires both a mourner who can tolerate the painfulness of grief and an external world that aids and abets in that process. Melancholia expresses a failure to successfully navigate the sometimes-treacherous waters when mourning itself is insufficiently tolerated by social conventions.

Second, by considering the particular potency of the culture of homophobia to disrupt the mourning experience of individuals, Crimp describes the particular ways in which the individual psychically mediates external reality. It is both the premature ending of the grieving process because of its social prohibition, a manic denial of ambivalence, and the acting out of grief through militancy that, for Crimp, result in forms both of inauthentic militancy and pathological mourning. Retaining the distinction insisted upon by Freud between psychic and external reality, Crimp insists that gay identity, as it manifests itself at one point in time or another, is not a product exclusively of a particular discursive or linguistic formation, a form of subjection, to which the individual subordinates him or herself. Identity, in contrast, is an inter-psychic process in which radical subjectivity – impulse, imagination and desire, framed within the ambivalent experiences of love and hate toward its objects – confronts linguistic category and social construction (see Prager, 1998). Sexual identity, in other words, forms simultaneously from the outside in and from the inside out: it is both deeply personal and deeply social. For that reason, identities are not constitutive of the person as much as they are historical in their formation (LaCapra, 1999: 713). Jewish identity changes in relation to the changing character of anti-Semitism, just as racial identity reflects the particular character of racism in a specific historical context. Identities, while originating in relation to personal loss, are nonetheless the products of an intersubjective relation between self and 'society' *at a given time*. At the same time, those who understand language and discursive power as forming the subject – as is often the case in an understanding of homosexual identity as subjected to and thereby shaped by the categories of the external world – homophobia – risk overlooking ways in which self-expression, as the sociologist Jack Katz (1999: 142; see also Prager, 2006a) describes it, are also 'refracted elaborately within' which

sometimes requires a person to observe surprisingly his or her own actions, where unconscious impulse, imagination and desire yield behaviours that exceed both social category and cognitive self-understanding. These two domains of irreducible experience (inner and outer, psychic and social) require their own independent understanding. Indeed, a central psychoanalytic tenet is that psychic reality makes its own distinctive contribution to social life, no less transformative of the social world than transformed by it. While ethnic, racial or religious identity is never as deeply inscribed in either the social or personal life as either gender or sexual identity, it is nonetheless true that a psychic and cultural dimension, neither reducible to the other, each plays its independent role in all of identity's formation.

Finally, as an ethical stance, Crimp posits the possibility for social action – engagement in the world – to be free from defensive denial. He holds out the hope, however difficult to achieve, that social critique and an acknowledgement of the psychic impediments to its realization can result in the production of unencumbered selves, informed, even constituted, by past experiences but not dominated by them. This position aligns itself with efforts in various social settings across the globe that attempt both to realize a psychic break with the past, not by forgetting but through remembering, and to loosen the hold of an identity formed by traumatic loss for the present. Here, social repair takes various forms of tribunals, testimonies, commissions, proceedings, legislation and hearings, with each offering specific forms of ritual and performance to demarcate past loss from present actions. Identity, rather than viewed as a kind of eternal reminder of past trauma carried forth into the present, is understood rather as part of a more fluid or mobile self-understanding, in which a sense of self might be finally detached from the dead object (either as victim or as perpetrator) allowing for the possibility of a future not foreclosed by past tragedies.

These then are the contours of a theory of loss and its relation to identity; one, in contrast to those offered by those who endorse the proposition that loss is neither possible nor desirable to overcome, that asserts instead that individuals need not remain melancholically attached to their past. It is a tripartite model in which for the normal mourning process to occur (1) a social world is required tolerant of grief and (2) a griever is capable of experiencing a whole complex of intense ambivalent feelings surrounding the loss of a loved object. When these conditions exist, (3) the lost object can become internalized through identification, setting itself up inside the psyche, but now substantially released from libidinal attachments. Sometimes extraordinary measures to achieve these ends must be undertaken, as in the case of Truth and Reconciliation commissions or other institutions established and framed around a politics of forgiveness and apology, lest the past recur in endless cycles of traumatic repetition.

Mourning or melancholia: loss and healthy ambivalence

Loss, mourning and melancholia were problems that preoccupied Freud largely during the middle part of his career. He consistently sought to understand the common role that losses played in normal mourning (also in pathological mourning) and in melancholia, though the two otherwise were distinctively different from one another. Freud significantly amends his theory between 1917, when *Mourning and Melancholia* was published, written prior to the onset of the wartime experiences of deep loss, and 1923 when *The Ego and the Id* was published, following the experiences of death and destruction of the First World War and subsequent to profound losses he personally suffered. In the 1923 essay, where Freud introduces his structural theory of the mind – a theory of the id, ego, and superego – he also significantly alters his theory of mourning. He offers now a more sober assessment of the capacity to definitively overcome loss and grief.

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud describes normal mourning as a process in which, over time, a detachment of libidinal, or eroticized, energy from the lost object occurs and the narcissistic love, or identification, that had been the fuel of attachment is restored back to the mourner him or herself. Eros now has the opportunity to attach itself to new objects, and mourning ostensibly has come to an end. The melancholic, in contrast, is unable to complete mourning; rather, the lost object does not become psychically detached. Instead, it is incorporated within the self and the ambivalent feeling directed to the lost objects expresses itself as an agent of criticism and judgment (what Freud would later call the super-ego) that mobilizes, in the name of the idealized dead object, a sustained internal attack against the self. Melancholics suffer, Freud argues, from a 'lowering of self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterances in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment' (1954c [1917]: 244). Different than for the mourner, the passage of time for the melancholic does not relieve the intense suffering that comes from the trauma of a world disrupted. 'In mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty', Freud writes, 'in melancholia it is the ego itself' (1954c: 246). Here, Freud suggests that the melancholic has little capacity to have ambivalent feelings 'come into the open', a process that would otherwise aid in the detachment process. Instead, the idealized dead object becomes internalized, and directed inward, forever clouding the freedom of the individual.

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud reconsiders the problem of identification and loss. He no longer asserts that normal mourners libidinally detach themselves fully from lost objects. He now proposes that common to all is an internalization through identification of those who were lost. Mourning never truly ends. The distinction collapses between mourner and melancholic. He defines the super-ego as 'a special agency of the ego' comprised of 'identifications which take the place of the abandoned cathexes by the id'. The loss of a sexual object, Freud writes, results in the 'setting up of the object inside the ego, *as it occurs in melancholia*', (1954a [1923]: 29, emphasis author's own).

Freud's recognition that the loss of a dead object universally results in its internalization, and is the basis of super-ego formation, becomes the basis for Judith Butler (1997: 134) to assert that all loss is melancholic. Butler suggests that a rigid heterosexual identity, in fact, results from an 'ungrieved and ungrievable loss' (1997: 136) of the same-sex parent and the formation of the gendered character of the ego. Her point is that especially because it goes ungrieved the parent of the same-sex becomes installed as homophobic prohibition, or as melancholic identification. The collusion between 'gendered anxiety' internally – of not being sufficiently feminine, if a woman, in desiring women or not sufficiently masculine, if a man, in desiring men – and a cultural logic of hetero-normative sexuality imposed externally produces a particular psychosexual matrix. For Butler, this matrix requires both men and women melancholically to perform a gendered and heterosexual identity.

For Butler, as for Crimp, identity is forged inter-psychically, the result of an often unconscious, sometimes conscious, struggle between love and hate, dependence and autonomy. The performance of identity describes the ever-present effort to reconcile inner experience (here, sexual desire) and external expectation (socially approved vehicles for desires' expression). But Butler, borrowing from Freud's later formulation of loss as forever present, makes two claims that distinguish her analysis from Crimp's: (1) that melancholia is constitutive in the formation of the subject, since the super-ego is comprised of the residues of the objects of loss, now expressed in the form of ever-present prohibition, and (2) in the face of 'the social regulation of psychic life' constituted intra-psychically (Butler 1997: 167), the capacity for individuals to work-through loss, to defend against powerful life-denying prohibitions and to be able to resist cultural subjection is radically diminished. The human condition is understood as one in which individuals are incapable of simultaneously loving (idealizing or embracing) forms of subjection while also hating (or resisting) prohibitions. In insisting on the constitutive character of melancholia, Butler (and those who have followed her lead either in acknowledging melancholy's omnipresence and/or in valorizing it as a form of identity) conflates a description of the historical subject without acknowledging the capacity for change over time – and the constitutive one where sexuality is a product of the ungrievable loss of the same sex parent (see LaCapra, 1999: 719). The conflation of the historical subject, as Crimp powerfully describes in the AIDS survivor of the late

1980s and 90s, to the constitutive subject, ipso facto bound to loss as decisive to a contemporary identity (for example, the homophobe), freezes history and hypostatizes given identities, as if they are forever unchanging and products of all-powerful mechanisms of subjection.

Butler's analysis and the contemporary endorsement of melancholic identity not only differ from Crimp's framework of understanding identity and its potential, they also resist a still important insight of Freud's. In spite of the shifts in his thought, Freud nonetheless resisted a characterization of melancholia as normative. He continued to treat mourning, even in *The Ego and the Id*, as a normal occurrence and as distinct from the pathological condition of melancholia. Confronted with a whole class of people – a clinical population – plagued with self-hatred and self-doubt, subjected to standards of behaviour to which they could not satisfy and largely incapacitated from acting assertively and decisively, Freud persisted in his effort (despite complications, emendations, reservations in his own thinking) to discover a unique etiology to the condition of melancholia. Toward that end, Freud invoked the decisive role of ambivalence to account for the difference between normal mourning and melancholic loss. The normal mourner, Freud concluded, has the capacity to mobilize ambivalent feelings toward lost objects, what he describes here as positive and negative oedipal positions, in self-defense against their idealized internalizations. In contrast to a melancholic's repudiation of the lost object now installed as a severe and demanding super-ego, the mourner learns to tolerate the ambiguity of his relation to the internalized object. Stated differently, the ego possesses within it an ability to resist unconscious guilt (or, the presence of this capacity of the ego to stand tall against the superego becomes a standard of mental health), to be able to hold conflicting stances toward the internalized object and the abandoned love-relation. The capacity to access hateful as well as loving feelings toward the same object (even as it remains as an idealized internal presence) speaks to the power of a psychic reality, bound by its own logic, language and rules. Resistance by the ego set against the superego ultimately distinguishes, for Freud, these two categories of experience. As Tammy Clewell has argued, 'in recognizing there can be no final severance of attachments without dissolving the ego, Freud's late theory suggests a different alternative: the mourning subject may affirm the endurance of ambivalent bonds to those loved and lost others as a condition of its own existence' (2004: 65). Mourning, rather than diminishing or weakening the individual, enables self-strengthening.

Ambivalence towards the past plays a decisive role in the mourning process: it is what enables the emergence, for example, of a healthy militancy where a politics of anti-homophobia – both culturally and psychically – becomes authentically possible, distinct from a manic defense against grief. It is what makes possible a politics of transitional justice, where new social institutions of reconciliation can be forged, motivated not by reaction and revenge but by the aspiration for a new set of identities no longer steeped in past categories of polarization and division. To acknowledge the difficulties that histories of past loss present for the contemporary individual to move beyond the shadow of the lost object should not, as those who valorize melancholic attachments are wont to do, be confused with the gains that come from an earnest effort to try.

Notes

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2 Germany continues to be deeply engaged with the question of the significance of suppressed histories on contemporary national life and politics. See, especially, Sebald (2003a, 2003b) and Grass (2003). The Nobel Laureate novelist Gunter Grass's recent revelations of his own suppressed history during World War II–his own membership in the elite Nazi Waffen-SS and the controversy and condemnation that resulted from him having kept it secret–reveals how writings about the dangers of unacknowledged pasts for Germans are more than merely a literary convention to explore their own national history. Rather the anger directed at Grass in real life expresses a widely-held conviction there that forgetting or suppressing one's past leaves one ever a victim to it. Remembering, in contrast, insures that new identities become possible and, collectively speaking, new ways of relating to one another are enabled.

3 For other examples of works that treat a nation's incapacity to move out from the shadow of the past as a pathological social condition, interfering with its full-blown capacity to engage the present, yet one that can be overcome, see Schivelbusch (2003), Gobodo-Madikizela (2003), Brooks (2004).

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