



The Paradox of Melancholia: Paralysis and Agency

Workshop Report

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The **Paradox of Melancholia** workshop was collaboration with the Ian Potter foundation, The Academy of Social Sciences, the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice and Flinders University School of Social and policy studies. The workshop was held on 22nd and 23rd June and was accompanied by a Public Lecture by Professor Jeffrey Prager held on the 21st June.

The intention of the workshop was to initiate a dialogue between three different groups 1. Social Scientists, 2. Psychoanalysts, and 3, Arts practitioners to address the creative and productive dimensions of melancholia (as distinct from Major Depression).

Over its long history, melancholy is a concept that has linked a series of twinned opposites: illness, disequilibrium, spleen, loss, grief, pain, paralysis, a-sociality *and* art, poetry, politics and protest. In contemporary social and cultural theory however, there is general distrust of this long association of melancholy with creativity. Philosopher Jennifer Radden (2009) sees attempts to reconnect melancholy and creativity as a form of neo-romanticism. Radden dubs this the “charm theory” of melancholy and has drawn attention to the identity politics in play in the return to self-valorising models of melancholy. Citing Kramer’s argument (2005), that the historical association of melancholia with creativity is as deluded as the 19th century association of tuberculosis with romantic character, Radden argued for an analytic separation between causal models of melancholy/depression and the need for sufferers to exercise some dominion over available representations of the ill self. The convenors of this workshop contended, however, that the contradictions that have freighted melancholy since antiquity are core to understanding how the interior states of melancholy translate into social forms and forces and core to recognising why melancholy matters — not just as a scholarly topic — but as one of

the principle ways that unspeakable forms of suffering and loss find expression in the cultural realm.

Our aim in this workshop was to reframe melancholy as a productive affect and to explore the way melancholy moves from an individual state into works that in turn impact upon collectivities. As German sociologist Wolf Lepenies demonstrated in *Melancholy and Society* (1992), melancholy is an affect that time and again, has played a salient role in galvanizing political dissent. Historically, the expression of melancholy in literature and art has often given voice to the marginalized and the disempowered, hence the rhetoric *contra* melancholy that one finds in authoritarian regimes. It has also been linked historically with the imagining of political futures. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) for example, included the first known Utopia in English. Our intention was to interrogate how melancholia, an illness involving disturbances in language, inertia and withdrawal also has this other social life distinguished by its expressivity.

Our two keynote speakers brought their very different perspectives to bear on the questions posed by the workshop. Jeffrey Prager, psychoanalyst and professor of Sociology at UCLA, presented a public lecture, **“Mourning becomes Eclectic: Racial Melancholia in an Age of Reconciliation”**. In this lecture, he treated racial melancholia as both a subjective feeling-state as well as a description of certain contemporary societies where race and/or ethnicity significantly structure interpersonal and institutional relations leading to what he called a “surplus racial order.” Professor Prager argued that racial melancholia is to be understood inter-subjectively, as co-created by all members of the racial order, those in minoritarian and majoritarian groups alike, and is passed on from one generation to the next. He defined melancholia as a psychic severing of a relationship to the past (restricting authentically remembering) and a foreclosing of future possibilities (limiting authentically imagining), and argued that melancholia generates a pre-occupation with a defensive in-the-present sadness/stillness and acceptance of the way things are, one that is experienced as eternal. The final section of his lecture addressed the political implications for racial injustice in racially melancholic societies, arguing that a politics of recognition and authentic reparation may be the only route to reconciliation and suggested that the harms done may make a successful emancipatory politics impossible.

Professor Madelon Sprengnether, Regents Professor in the Department of English, University of Minnesota, delivered a paper entitled **“Ghosts and Ancestors”**, which considered Hans Loewald’s distinction between ghosts and ancestors as a means of investigating the similarities and differences between the processes of melancholia and mourning. Loewald states: “Those who know ghosts tell us that they long to be released from their ghost life and led to rest as ancestors. As ancestors they live forth in the present generation, while as ghosts they are compelled to haunt the present generation with their shadow life.” While Freud, in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), clearly differentiates between these two mental states, subsequent theorists (K. Abraham, M. Klein, J. Kristeva, N. Abraham and M. Torok) regard them as intertwined, given their mutual point of origin in the elegiac construction of the ego. The emphasis on early development stages, coupled with a Lacanian view of language in relation to symbolization, further complicates these issues, especially as they relate to theories of trauma. If, as some of these theorists suggest, melancholia returns us to a primitive state of inner ambivalence and persecution that is inaccessible to representation, Sprengnether asked, how can one hope to transform a ghost into an ancestor—that is to say, the paralysis of clinical depression into the more mobile process of mourning? Making use of Judith Butler’s concept of social vulnerability as an outgrowth of ego formation, along with Avery Gordon’s examination of the dynamics of “haunting” in novels by Toni Morrison and Luisa Valenzuela, Professor Sprengnether proposed that haunting may be experienced in two ways—as ghosts who render us speechless through horror, or as ancestors who serve to remind us, in painful though also useful ways, of our personal, social and cultural histories, which also foster possibilities of growth and change.

The diversity and inter-disciplinarity of participants in the symposium made for very lively discussion. To mention just a few contributions: Professor Ross Gibson presented a paper that contrasted the fluidity, complexity and dynamism of the Eora people with the yearning for stasis, simplicity and groundedness of the English at Port Jackson. As he writes: “It is a yearning that has grown evermore fearful as it has become increasingly intransigent and ineffective. It has become a kind of lurking communal melancholia” In his paper he suggested that this melancholia may convert into mania or into something “much better”. Writer Phillip McLaren argued conversely, that melancholia was indispensable to

aesthetic production, and in a visual presentation explored the intersection of western and indigenous melancholia in both visual arts and music. PhD candidate Researcher Rita Horanyi presented a paper exploring the role of melancholia in Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai's debut novel, *Sátántangó* (1985). Horanyi argued that by drawing on rich literary tropes of ruin, disintegration, failure and disillusionment, Krasznahorkai's novel flies in the face of the teleological ideologies of socialism and expresses the loss of the unattained ideals of Hungarian modernity—social solidarity, freedom, homeland, and truth. Like other modernist melancholics, she suggested, Krasznahorkai's writing transforms melancholy's force of negativity into the infinite movement of creativity as it depicts the failure of modernity's promises.

Feedback from the conference was extremely positive. Professor Jeffrey Prager communicated " I want you to know that I very much enjoyed my time at the Conference, meeting all the various people present, speaking with the many graduate students, and getting to know both you and Brian (Castro). That was a real pleasure and I hope the occasion occurs before long when we might be able to be together again. So thanks for all your hard work in putting the conference together and for being responsible for helping to generate real interchange between people who otherwise would not have had the occasion to meet." Other conference participants were equally enthusiastic about the depth of exchange. In a similar vein Professor Ann McCulloch wrote; ".... I want to congratulate you both for such a significant event. I found the two days of enormous value for so many reasons which, Jennifer, I will discuss with you when we meet again in Fiji .I met some amazing people as well. Thank you so much for bringing this together. It was brilliant." Early career researcher Daniel Chaffee commented that it was the best academic symposium he had ever attended.

The anticipated budget was for the workshop was \$21,697 including in-kind support but the final budget, which included grants from the J.M. Coetzee Centre, Flinders University and the academy of the Social Sciences, was \$14,260.00 with additional in-kind support from Flinders University. Consequently, we trimmed costs to meet this reduced budget. Despite this, we were able to cover all costs. And keep to our original vision of the workshop. Please see the itemised budget attached.

A proposed edited collection from the workshop is in progress and will be submitted, in the first instance, to Common ground Press in the UK.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Academy of Social Sciences for their support for this workshop.



Professor Anthony Elliott



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