

Melancholy Gender—Refused Identification

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Freud's discussion of melancholy in "Mourning and Melancholia" includes an account of identification as the incorporation of the lost object. This essay first seeks to establish a relation between that incorporative identification and the formation of "the bodily ego." It then seeks to situate this melancholic condition of the bodily ego in terms of the "loss" of the same-sexed object under prevalent conditions of compulsory heterosexuality. This "loss" might be better understood on the model of foreclosure, suggesting that it is a loss resolved into a melancholic identification and hence central to the formation of same-sex gender identification. This account of the melancholic consequences of a disavowed homosexual attachment is then situated in terms of contemporary conditions of grief over the loss by AIDS of so many gay men. The suggestion here is that the cultural "unreality" of that "loss" may be attributable to the foreclosed status of homosexual love as that which "never was" and "never was lost."

"In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."

[Freud, 1917]

"How is it then that in melancholia the super-ego can become a kind of gathering-place for the death instincts?"

[Freud, 1923]

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IT MAY AT FIRST SEEM STRANGE to think of gender as a kind of melancholy, or as one of melancholy's effects, but let us remember that in *The Ego and the Id* Freud (1923) himself acknowledged that melancholy, the unfinished process of grieving, is central to the formation of those identifications which form the ego itself. Indeed, those identifications which are formed from unfinished grief are the modes in which the lost object is incorporated and phantasmatically preserved in and as the ego. Consider in conjunction with this insight Freud's further remark that "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego" (p. 26), not merely a surface, but "the projection of a surface." And, further, this bodily ego will assume a gendered morphology, so that we might well claim that the bodily ego is at once a gendered ego. What I hope, first, to explain is the sense in which a melancholic identification is central to that process whereby the gendered character of the ego is assumed. Second, I want to explore how this analysis of the melancholic formation of gender sheds light on the cultural predicament of living within a culture that can mourn the loss of homosexual attachment only with great difficulty.

Reflecting on his speculations in "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud (1923) writes that in the earlier essay he supposed that

"an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego—that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification. At that time, however, we did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and how typical it is. Since then we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution toward building up what is called its "character" (p. 28).

Slightly later in this same text, Freud expands this view: "When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia" (p. 29). He concludes this discussion with the speculation that "it may be that this identification is the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects. . . . it makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the

history of those object-choices" (p. 29). What Freud here calls the "character of the ego" appears to be the sedimentation of those objects loved and lost, the archaeological remainder, as it were, of unresolved grief.

But what is perhaps most striking about his formulation here is the way in which it reverses his position in "Mourning and Melancholia" on what it means to resolve grief. In the earlier essay, Freud (1917) appears to have assumed that grief could be resolved through a *de-cathexis*, a breaking of attachment, as well as the subsequent making of new attachments. In *The Ego and the Id*, however, Freud (1923) makes room for the notion that melancholic identification may be a *prerequisite* for letting the object go. And yet, by claiming this, he changes what it means to "let an object go." For there is no final breaking of the attachment; there is, rather, the incorporation of the attachment *as* identification, where identification becomes a magical, a psychic, form of preserving the object. And, insofar as identification is the psychic preserve of the object and such identifications come to form the ego, then the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identifications and is, in that sense, made coextensive with the ego itself. Indeed, one might conclude that melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to *preserve* the object as part of the ego itself and, hence, to avert the loss as a complete loss. Here we see that letting the object go means, paradoxically, that there is no full abandonment of the object, only a transferring of the status of the object from external to internal; giving up the object becomes possible only on condition of a melancholic internalization or, what might for our purposes turn out to be even more important, a melancholic *incorporation*.

If, in melancholia, a loss is refused, it is not for that reason abolished. Indeed, internalization is the way in which loss is preserved in the psyche. Or, put perhaps more precisely, the internalization of loss is part of the mechanism of its refusal. If the object can no longer exist in the external world, it will then exist internally; and that internalization will also be a way to disavow that loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss.

Is there a way in which *gender* identifications or, rather, those identifications which become central to the formation of gender, are

produced through melancholic identification? More particularly, it seems clear that the positions of “masculine” and “feminine,” which Freud (1905) understood as the effects of laborious and uncertain accomplishment, are established in part through prohibitions that *demand the loss* of certain sexual attachments and demand as well that those losses *not* be avowed and *not* be grieved. If the assumption of femininity and the assumption of masculinity proceed through the accomplishment of an always tenuous heterosexuality, we might understand the force of this accomplishment as the mandating of the abandonment of homosexual attachments or, perhaps more trenchantly, the *preemption* of the possibility of homosexual attachment, a certain foreclosure of possibility that produces a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss. This heterosexuality is produced not only by implementing the prohibition on incest but, prior to that, by enforcing the prohibition on homosexuality. The oedipal conflict presumes that heterosexual desire has already been *accomplished*, that the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual has been enforced (a distinction that, after all, has no necessity); in this sense, the prohibition on incest presupposes the prohibition on homosexuality, for it presumes the heterosexualization of desire.

Indeed, to accept this view we must begin with the presupposition that masculine and feminine are not dispositions, as Freud sometimes argues, but accomplishments, ones that emerge in tandem with the achievement of heterosexuality. Here Freud articulates a cultural logic whereby gender is achieved and stabilized through the accomplishment of heterosexual positioning and where the threats to heterosexuality thus become threats to gender itself. The prevalence of this heterosexual matrix in the construction of gender emerges not only in Freud’s text, but also in those cultural forms of life that have absorbed this matrix and are inhabited by everyday forms of gender anxiety. Hence, the fear of homosexual desire in a woman may induce a panic that she is losing her femininity; that she is not a woman, that she is no longer a proper woman; that, if she is not quite a man, she is like one and hence monstrous in some way. Or, in a man, the terror over homosexual desire may well lead to a terror over being construed as feminine, feminized; of no longer being properly a man or of being a “failed” man; or of being in some sense a figure of monstrosity or abjection.

Now, I would argue that phenomenologically there are indeed all sorts of ways of experiencing gender and sexuality that do not reduce to this equation, that do not presume that gender is stabilized through the installation of a firm heterosexuality. But, for the moment, I want to invoke this stark and hyperbolic construction of the relation between gender and sexuality in order to try to think through the question of ungrieved and ungrievable loss in the formation of what we might call the gendered character of the ego.

Consider that gender is acquired at least in part through the repudiation of homosexual attachments: the girl becomes a girl by being subject to a prohibition that 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 ungrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis. If one is a girl to the extent that one does not want a girl, then wanting a girl will bring being a girl into question; within this matrix, homosexual desire thus panics gender.

Heterosexuality is cultivated through prohibitions, where these prohibitions take as one of their objects homosexual attachments, thereby forcing the loss of those attachments.¹ For it seems clear that, if the girl is to transfer the love from her father to a substitute object, she must first renounce the love for her mother and renounce it in such a way that both the aim and the object are foreclosed. Hence, it will not be a matter of transferring that homosexual love onto a substitute feminine figure, but of renouncing the possibility of homosexual attachment itself. Only on this condition does a heterosexual aim become established as what some call a sexual orientation. Only on the condition of this foreclosure of homosexuality can the scene emerge in which it is the father and, hence, the substitutes for him who become the objects of desire, and the mother who becomes the uneasy site of identification.

Becoming a “man” within this logic requires not only a repudiation of femininity, but also a repudiation that becomes a precondition for the heterosexualization of sexual desire and, thus perhaps also, its fundamental ambivalence. If a man becomes heterosexual through the repudiation of the feminine, then where does that repudiation live

¹ Presumably, sexuality must be trained away from things, animals, parts of all of the above, and narcissistic attachments of various kinds.

except in an identification that his heterosexual career seeks to deny? Indeed, the desire for the feminine is marked by that repudiation: he wants the woman he would never be. Indeed, he wouldn't be caught dead being her; thus, he wants her. She is at once his repudiated identification (a repudiation he sustains as identification and the object of his desires). One of the most anxious aims of his desire will be to elaborate the difference between him and her, and he will seek to discover and install that proof. This will be a wanting haunted by a dread of being what it wants, a wanting that will also always be a kind of dread; and, precisely because what is repudiated and hence lost is preserved as a repudiated identification, this desire will be an attempt to overcome an identification that can never be complete.

Indeed, he will not identify with her, and he will not desire another man, and so that refusal to desire, that sacrifice of desire under the force of prohibition, will incorporate that homosexuality as an identification with masculinity. But this masculinity will be haunted by the love it cannot grieve. Before I suggest how this might be true, I'd like to situate the kind of writing that I have been offering as a certain cultural engagement with psychoanalytic theory that belongs neither to the fields of psychology nor to psychoanalysis, but that nevertheless seeks to establish an intellectual relationship to those enterprises.

This has so far been something like an exegesis of a certain psychoanalytic logic, one that appears in some psychoanalytic texts but that is also contested sometimes in those same texts and sometimes in others; this is, of course, not an empirical set of claims nor even an account of the current scholarship in psychoanalysis on gender, sexuality, or melancholy. These enterprises are not ones that I am equipped to take on. Trained in philosophy but working now in a field of cultural criticism that draws from psychoanalysis but also moves between literary theory and the emergent discourses of feminist and gay cultural practices, I want merely to suggest what I take to be some productive convergences between Freud's thinking on ungrieved and ungrievable loss and the cultural predicament of living within a culture that can mourn the loss of homosexual attachment only with great difficulty. This problem is made all the more acute when we consider the ravages of AIDS and the task of finding a public occasion and language in which to grieve this seemingly endless number of deaths. But more generally, this problem makes itself felt in the uncertainty with which homosexual

love and loss is regarded: is this regarded as a “true” love, a “true” loss, a love and loss worthy or capable of being grieved and, in that sense, worthy or capable of ever having been lived? Or is this a love and a loss haunted by the specter of a certain unreality, a certain unthinkability, the double disavowal of “I never loved her, and I never lost her,” uttered by a woman; the “I never loved him, I never lost him,” uttered by a man. Is this the “never-never” that supports the naturalized surface of heterosexual life as well as its pervasive melancholia? Is this the disavowal of loss by which sexual formation, including gay sexual formation, proceeds?

For if we accept the notion that the prohibition on homosexuality operates throughout a largely heterosexual culture as one of its defining operations, then it appears that the loss of homosexual objects and aims (not simply this person of the same gender, but *any* person of that same gender) will be foreclosed from the start. I use the word “foreclosed” to suggest that this is a preemptive loss, a mourning for unlived possibilities; for if this is a love that is from the start out of the question, then it cannot happen and, if it does, it certainly did not; if it does, it happens only under the official sign of its prohibition and disavowal.² When certain kinds of losses are compelled by a set of culturally prevalent prohibitions, then we may well expect a culturally prevalent form of melancholia, one that signals the internalization of the ungrieved and ungrievable homosexual cathexis. And 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 consequence. Of course, it comes as no surprise that the more hyperbolic and defensive a masculine identification, the more fierce the ungrieved homosexual cathexis, and in this sense we might understand both “masculinity” and “femininity” as formed and consolidated through identifications that are composed in part of disavowed grief.

If we accept the notion that heterosexuality naturalizes itself by insisting on the radical otherness of homosexuality, then heterosexual identity is purchased through a melancholic incorporation of the love

²The notion of foreclosure has become Lacanian terminology for Freud’s notion of “*Verwerfung*”. Distinguished from repression, understood as an action by an already formed subject, foreclosure is an act of negation that founds and forms the subject itself. See Laplanche and Pontalis, 1967, pp. 163–167.

that it disavows: the man who insists on the coherence of his heterosexuality will claim that he never loved another man and thus never lost another man. And that love, that attachment, becomes subject to a double disavowal: a never-having-loved, and a never-having-lost. This “never-never” thus founds the heterosexual subject, as it were; this is an identity based on the refusal to avow an attachment and, hence, the refusal to grieve.

But there is perhaps a more culturally instructive way of describing this scenario, for it is not simply a matter of an individual’s unwillingness to avow and to grieve homosexual attachments. When the prohibition against homosexuality is culturally pervasive, then the “loss” of homosexual love is precipitated through a prohibition that is repeated and ritualized throughout the culture. What ensues is a culture of gender melancholy in which masculinity and femininity emerge as the traces of an ungrieved and ungrievable love; indeed, where masculinity and femininity within the heterosexual matrix are strengthened through the repudiations that they perform. In opposition to a conception of sexuality that is said to “express” a gender, gender itself is here understood to be composed of precisely what remains inarticulate in sexuality.

If we understand gender melancholy in this way, then perhaps we can make sense of the peculiar phenomenon whereby homosexual desire becomes a source of guilt. Freud (1917) argues that melancholy is marked by the experience of self-beratement. He writes:

If one listens patiently to a melancholic’s many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but that with insignificant modifications they do fit someone else, some person whom the patient loves or has loved or should love. . . . the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted on to the patient’s own ego [p. 248].

Freud goes on to conjecture that the conflict with the other that remains unresolved at the time the other is lost reemerges in the psyche as a way of continuing the quarrel. Indeed, the anger at the other is doubtless exacerbated by the death or departure that consti-

tutes the occasion for the loss. But this anger is turned inward and becomes the substance of self-beratement.

Freud (1914) links the experience of guilt to the turning back into the ego of homosexual libido. Putting aside the question of whether libido can be homosexual or heterosexual, we might rephrase Freud and consider guilt as the turning back into the ego of homosexual attachment. If the loss becomes a renewed scene of conflict, and if the aggression that follows from that loss cannot be articulated or externalized, then it rebounds upon the ego itself, in the form of a superego. This will eventually lead Freud (1923) to link melancholic identification with the agency of the superego but already in "On Narcissism" (Freud, 1914) we have some sense of how guilt is wrought from ungrivable homosexuality.

The ego is said to become impoverished in melancholia, but it appears as poor precisely through the workings of self-beratement. The ego ideal, what Freud calls the "measure" against which the ego is judged by the superego, is precisely the ideal of social rectitude defined over and against homosexuality. Freud writes that:

this ideal has a social side; it is also the common ideal of a family, a class or a nation. It binds not only narcissistic libido, but also a considerable amount of his homosexual libido, which is in this way turned back into the ego. The want of satisfaction that arises from the non-fulfillment of this ideal liberates homosexual libido, is transformed into a sense of guilt and this is social anxiety [pp. 101–102].

But the movement of this "transformation" is not altogether clear. After all, Freud (1930) will argue that these social ideals are transformed into a sense of guilt through a kind of internalization that is not, ultimately, mimetic. It is not that one treats oneself only as harshly as one was treated but, rather, that the aggression toward the ideal and its unfulfillability is turned inward, and this self-aggression becomes the primary structure of conscience: "by means of identification [the child] takes the unattackable authority into himself" (p. 129).

In this sense, in melancholia the superego can become a "gathering place" for the death instincts. As a "gathering place" for the death instincts, the superego is figured as a site where the death instincts

gather, but it is not necessarily the same as those instincts or their effect. In this way, melancholia attracts the death instincts to the superego, where they are understood as a regressive striving toward organic equilibrium, and the self-beratement of the superego is understood to make use of that regressive striving for its own purposes. Where melancholy is the refusal of grief, it is also always the incorporation of loss, the miming of the death it cannot mourn. In this sense, the incorporation of death draws on the death instincts such that we might well wonder whether the two are separable from one another, either analytically or phenomenologically.

The prohibition on homosexuality preempts the process of grief and prompts a melancholic identification that effectively turns homosexual desire back onto itself. This turning back onto itself is precisely the action of self-beratement and guilt. Significantly, homosexuality is *not* abolished, but preserved, and yet the site where homosexuality is preserved will be precisely in the prohibition on homosexuality. Freud (1930) makes clear that conscience requires the continuous sacrifice or renunciation of instinct to produce that peculiar satisfaction that conscience requires; conscience is never assuaged by renunciation but, paradoxically, is strengthened (renunciation breeds intolerance) (p. 128). For renunciation does not abolish the instinct; it deploys the instinct for its own purposes, such that prohibition, and the lived experience of prohibition as repeated renunciation, is nourished precisely by the instinct that it renounces. In this scenario, renunciation requires the very homosexuality that it condemns, not as its external object, but as its own most treasured source of sustenance. The act of renouncing homosexuality thus paradoxically strengthens homosexuality, but it strengthens homosexuality precisely *as* the power of renunciation. Renunciation becomes the aim and vehicle of satisfaction. And it is, we might conjecture, precisely the fear of setting loose homosexuality from this circuit of renunciation that so terrifies the guardians of masculinity in the U.S. military. For what would masculinity “be” if it were not for this aggressive circuit of renunciation from which it is wrought? Gays in the military threaten to undo masculinity only because this is a masculinity made of repudiated homosexuality.

Although I have been attempting to describe a melancholy that is produced through the compulsory production of heterosexuality and,

so, a heterosexual melancholy that one might read in the workings of gender itself, I want now to turn this analysis in a slightly different direction in order to suggest that rigid forms of gender and sexual identification, whether homosexual or heterosexual, appear to spawn forms of melancholy as their consequence. I would like to reconsider first the theory of gender as performative that I elaborated in *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990) and then to turn to the question of gay melancholia and the political consequences of ungrievable loss.

I argued that gender was performative, and by that I meant that there is no gender that is “expressed” by actions, gestures, or speech, but that the performance of gender was precisely that which produced retroactively the illusion that there was an inner gender core. Indeed, the performance of gender might be said retroactively to produce the effect of some true or abiding feminine essence or disposition, such that one could not use an expressive model for thinking about gender. Moreover, I argued that gender is produced as a ritualized repetition of conventions and that this ritual is socially compelled in part by the force of a compulsory heterosexuality. I used the example of the drag performance to illustrate what I meant, and the subsequent reception of my work unfortunately took that example to be exemplary of what I meant by performativity. In this context, I would like to return to the question of drag to explain in clearer terms how I understand psychoanalysis to be linked with gender performativity and how I take performativity to be linked with melancholia.

It would not be enough to say that gender is only performed or that the meaning of gender can be derived from its performance, whether or not one wants to rethink performance as a compulsory social ritual. For there clearly are workings of gender that do not “show” in what is performed as gender, and the reduction of the psychic workings of gender to the literal performance of gender would be a mistake. Psychoanalysis insists that the opacity of the unconscious sets limits to the exteriorization of the psyche. It also argues, rightly I think, that what is exteriorized or performed can be understood only through reference to what is barred from the performance, what cannot or will not be performed.

The relation between drag performances and gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* went something like this: when it is a man performing drag as a woman, the “imitation” that drag is said to be is taken as

an “imitation” of femininity—the “femininity” that is imitated is not itself understood as being an imitation at all. And yet, if one considers that gender is acquired, that it is assumed in relation to ideals that are never quite inhabited by anyone, then femininity is an ideal that anyone always and only “imitates.” Thus, drag imitates the imitative structure of gender, revealing gender itself as an imitation. However playful and attractive this formulation may have seemed at the time, it did not address the question of how it is that certain forms of disavowal and repudiation come to organize the performance of gender. How is the phenomenon of gender melancholia to be related to the practice of gender performativity?

Moreover, given the iconographic figure of the melancholic drag queen, one might ask whether there is not a dissatisfied longing in the mimetic incorporation of gender that is drag. Here one might ask also after the disavowal that occasions the performance and which performance might be said to enact, where performance engages “acting out” in the psychoanalytic sense.³ If melancholia in Freud’s sense is the effect of an ungrieved loss,⁴ it may be that performance, understood as “acting out,” is essentially related to the problem of unacknowledged loss. Where there is an ungrieved loss in drag performance, perhaps it is a loss that is refused and incorporated in the performed identification, one that reiterates a gendered idealization and its radical uninhabitability. This is, then, neither a territorialization of the feminine by the masculine nor a sign of the essential plasticity of gender. What it does suggest is that the performance allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve, allegorizes the incorporative fantasy of melancholia whereby an object is phantasmatically taken in or on as a way of refusing to let it go. Gender itself might be understood in part as the “acting out” of unresolved grief.

The foregoing analysis is a risky one because it suggests that, for a “man” performing femininity or for a “woman” performing masculinity

³ I thank Laura Mulvey for asking me to consider the relation between performativity and disavowal, and Wendy Brown for encouraging me to think about the relation between melancholia and drag and for asking whether the denaturalization of gender norms is the same as their subversion. I also thank Mandy Merck for numerous enlightening questions that led to these speculations, including the suggestion that if disavowal conditions performativity, then perhaps gender itself might be understood on the model of the fetish.

⁴ See “Freud and the Melancholia of Gender” in Butler, 1990.

(the latter is always, in effect, to perform a little less, given that femininity is cast as the spectacular gender), there is an attachment to—and a loss and refusal of—the figure of femininity by the man or the figure of masculinity by the woman. Thus, it is important to underscore that drag is an effort to negotiate cross-gendered identification, but that cross-gendered identification is not the paradigm for thinking about homosexuality, although it may well be one among others. In this sense, drag allegorizes some set of melancholic incorporative fantasies that stabilize *gender*. Not only are a vast number of drag performers straight, but it would be a mistake to think that homosexuality is best explained through the performativity that is drag. What does seem useful in this analysis, however, is that drag exposes or allegorizes the mundane psychic and performative practices by which heterosexualized genders form themselves through the renunciation of the *possibility* of homosexuality, a foreclosure that produces a field of heterosexual objects at the same time as it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love. Drag thus allegorizes *heterosexual melancholy*, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love; a feminine gender is formed (taken on, assumed) through the incorporative fantasy by which the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love, an exclusion never grieved, but “preserved” through the heightening of feminine identification itself. In this sense, the “truest” lesbian melancholic is the strictly straight woman, and the “truest” gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man.

What drag does expose, however, is that in the “normal” constitution of gender presentation the gender that is performed is constituted by a set of disavowed attachments, identifications that constitute a different domain of the “unperformable.” Indeed, it may be, but need not be, that what constitutes the *sexually* unperformable is performed instead as *gender identification*.⁵ To the extent that homosexual attachments remain unacknowledged within normative heterosexuality, they are not merely constituted as desires that emerge and subsequently

⁵This is not to suggest that an exclusionary matrix rigorously distinguishes between how one identifies and how one desires; it is quite possible to have overlapping identification and desire in heterosexual or homosexual exchange or in a bisexual history of sexual practice. Further, “masculinity” and “femininity” do not exhaust the terms for either eroticized identification or desire.

become prohibited; rather, these are desires proscribed from the start. And when they do emerge on the far side of the censor, they may well carry that mark of impossibility with them, performing, as it were, as the impossible within the possible. As such, they will not be attachments that can be openly grieved. This is, then, less *the refusal* to grieve (the *Mitscherlich* formulation that accents the choice involved) than a preemption of grief performed by the absence of cultural conventions for avowing the loss of homosexual love. And it is this absence that produces a culture of heterosexual melancholy, one that can be read in the hyperbolic identifications by which mundane heterosexual masculinity and femininity confirm themselves. The straight man *becomes* (mimes, cites, appropriates, assumes the status of) the man he “never” loved and “never” grieved; the straight woman *becomes* the woman she “never” loved and “never” grieved. It is in this sense, then, that what is most apparently performed as gender is the sign and symptom of a pervasive disavowal.

Moreover, it is precisely to counter this pervasive cultural risk of gay melancholia (what the newspapers generalize as “depression”) that there has been an insistent publicization and politicization of grief over those who have died from AIDS; the NAMES Project Quilt is exemplary, ritualizing and repeating the name itself as a way of publicly avowing the limitless loss (see Crimp, 1989).

Insofar as the grief remains unspeakable (some part of grief is perhaps always unspeakable), the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that very rage over loss is publicly proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions. The emergence of collective institutions for grieving is thus crucial to survival, to the reassembling of community, the rearticulation of kinship, the reweaving of sustaining relations. And insofar as they involve the publicization and dramatization of death—as in the case of “die-ins” by Queer Nation—they call to be read as life-affirming rejoinders to the dire psychic consequences of a grieving process culturally thwarted and proscribed.

Melancholy can work, however, within homosexuality in specific ways that call to be rethought. Within the formation of gay and lesbian identity, there may be an effort to disavow a constitutive relationship to heterosexuality. When this disavowal is understood as a political necessity in order to *specify* gay and lesbian identity over and against its

ostensible opposite, heterosexuality, that cultural practice culminates paradoxically in a weakening of the very constituency it is meant to unite. Not only does such a strategy attribute a false monolithic status to heterosexuality, but it misses the political opportunity to work the weakness in heterosexual subjectivation and to refute the logic of mutual exclusion by which heterosexism proceeds. Moreover, a full-scale denial of that interrelationship can constitute a rejection of heterosexuality that is to some degree an identification *with* a rejected heterosexuality. Important to this economy, however, is the refusal to recognize this identification, which is, as it were, already made, a refusal that absently designates the domain of a specifically gay melancholia, a loss that cannot be recognized and hence cannot be mourned. For a gay or lesbian identity-position to sustain its appearance as coherent, heterosexuality must remain in that rejected and repudiated place. Paradoxically, its heterosexual *remains* must be *sustained* precisely through the insistence on the seamless coherence of a specifically gay identity. Here it should become clear that a radical refusal to identify suggests that, on some level, an identification has already taken place, an identification that is made and disavowed, a disavowed identification whose symptomatic appearance is the insistence, the overdetermination, of the identification that is, as it were, worn on the body that shows.

This raises the political question of the cost of articulating a coherent identity-position if that coherence is produced through the production, exclusion, and repudiation of a domain of abjected specters that threaten the arbitrarily closed domain of subject positions. Indeed, it may be that only by risking the *incoherence* of identity that connection is possible, a political point that correlates with Bersani's (1986) insight that only the decentered subject is available to desire. For what cannot be avowed as a constitutive identification of any given subject-position runs the risk not only of becoming externalized in a degraded form but of being repeatedly repudiated and subject to a policy of disavowal.

The logic of repudiation that I have charted here is in some ways a hyperbolic theory, a logic in drag, as it were, that overstates the case, but overstates it for a reason. For there is no necessary reason for identification to oppose desire, or for desire to be fueled through repudiation. And this remains true for heterosexuality and homosexuality alike, and for forms of bisexuality that take themselves to be composite

forms of each. Indeed, we are made all the more fragile under the pressure of such rules, and all the more mobile when ambivalence and loss are given a dramatic language in which to do their acting out.

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