

Minima Melancholia: Performances of Affective Refusals and Rem(a)inders

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This paper will have to start with feelings about feeling acknowledging that the following reflections, in their attempt to, in Adorno's words, "speak immediately of the immediate," emerge from a temporality and subjectivity in a constant process of dissolution.¹ The risk here is that in this act these flowing conditions become arrested through the inescapable laws of writing. Nevertheless, aware of Adorno's warning in his dedication in *Minima Moralia* of the "complicity that enfolds all those who, in face of unspeakable collective events, speak of individual matters..." I am unable, as I write this, to find another way, still in search of *how* to write on the topic of melancholia that does not begin from feelings about the subject matter *because* of collective events.² Some of the more pronounced ones that emerged upon receiving this call for papers on the topic of melancholia, politics and performance were anger, exasperation, irritation, frustration. The entry into the task of writing about the subject of that negative affect named melancholia, in this particular time and space, brought about a series of feelings Sianne Ngai calls "ugly".³ What is it to begin from a condition of experiencing such ugly feelings? What is it about this immediate and particular time and space that compels such a refusal? In what ways is writing (since this paper cannot be a scream) on the subject of melancholia, or more precisely the desire for the minimizing of

¹ Theodor Adorno: "Dedication", in: *Minima Moralia*, New York 2005, p. 15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³ Sianne Ngai: *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2005.

its accenting, complicated by the fact that the object of study can only, in this case, be tackled by sifting through subjective feelings that are in turn negative?

Extending from a sense that affective responses inexorably inform theoretical ones, this unpremeditated methodological approach in the throes of still forming itself emerges then from that historically fraught theoretical terrain where the confused boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity emanate. In attempting to tackle the above questions the essay will grapple with the persistent ways in which "the subjective dimension of feeling, in particular, in seeming to undercut its validity as an object of *materialist* inquiry, has posed a difficulty for contemporary theorists."⁴ Sianne Ngai continues:

[F]eelings are as fundamentally "social" as the institutions and collective practices that have been the more traditional objects of historicist criticism (as Raymond Williams was perhaps the earliest to argue, in his analyses of "structures of feeling"), and as "material" as the linguistic signs and significations that have been the more traditional objects of literary formalism. Although feeling is not reducible to these institutions, collective practices, or discursive significations, it is nonetheless as socially real...⁵

Feeling and sensing our way through the world, socially real feelings and sensorial multiplicities determine. Yet insofar as feelings are transitional processes, unregulated passages that do not exist in isolation from other fluctuating feelings that determine, indeterminacy is amplified. I am interested in the ways these relationalities, where irreducible feelings are necessarily singular and plural, inform subjective and collective acts, and how subjective agencies release forces, inflect affective spheres that in turn emanate from

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25

multitudes of subjective acts. How feelings regarding melancholia released here through a signifying narrative, also exist as flows of amorphous intensities. How the interplay and assemblage of these jostling forces that simultaneously birth and are conditioned by affective indeterminacy may relate to political action and performance. Similarly to Ngai I use the terms affect and feeling interchangeably here whilst conceding though a “modal difference of degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind” between them where “ambient affects may in fact be better suited to interpreting ongoing states of affairs.” This is where the politics of affect emerges more clearly, for Ngai is interested in how the minor ugly feelings she analyses, such as irritation, envy, anxiety and the “unsuitability of these weakly intentional feelings for forceful or unambiguous action” as opposed to stronger affects such as fear and anger, may in fact assist us in studying collective or individual “situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular.”⁶ These feelings regarding melancholia then are always also feelings regarding politics and performance.

We face and author many thwarted situations nowadays, encounter repeated collective impasses, conflicts, drives, interiorities, voices, desires. In organizing our thoughts and actions common feelings emerge, nebulous stages of simultaneous hope and despondency. In singular general assemblies of singularities, constant shifting feelings of, to name a few, excitement, possibility, longing, disappointment, bitterness, resignation, gather and proliferate, search for articulation and representation. Insistent practices at collectivity, at building, spew and negotiate, inhabit and are inhabited by affects that arise “in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon,” as Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write.⁷ These “forces and forces of encounter” mark the body’s belonging or non-belonging in the world through constant struggling, performing,

⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁷ Gregory J. Seigworth & Melissa Gregg (eds.): *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham 2010, p. 1.

doing, becoming in uncommon common.⁸ Through a being together for radical change, turning blind corners together, sheltering in gassed arcades together, helping each other step over into that which is here and not yet.

Intense forces and forces of encounter and their resonances abound in the Greek public sphere. Feelings and actions both ugly and not so ugly are unleashed from the challenges we face, as we experience a perpetual series of dreadful formations through and amidst a multitude of constant unformed becomings. Just a few days ago, on June 11, 2013 Greek Prime Minister Samaras implemented, without prior negotiation or warning, the closure of the National broadcaster ERT, and all its departments, singlehandedly laying off all its workers. This unprecedented move (unapproved by parliament with signage halted by police escort), is justified as a necessary austere measure at the same time that the administration refuses to explicitly denounce racism and pass an anti-racist bill through parliament. In fact, it is coming to light that Samaras’ conservative party New Democracy may be open to an alliance with parliamentary members of neo-nazi Golden Dawn (currently the third party in national polls) if it means securing power in the next elections.

At the same time, across the Aegean Sea people in Turkey steadfastly face water cannons, chemicals, beatings, rubber bullets and propelling tear gas canisters for 22 days now. What began on May 28, 2013 as an intervention by a small group of activists who saw fit to protect a park in Istanbul has escalated into a countrywide protest against an authoritarian, fundamentalist neoliberal governmentality. As fatigue sets in we look across the sea to Turkey, and across other seas, for Brazil has reared its anti-capitalist refusal and fury since I began writing this, to those other sites of struggle, and to seas of histories of struggle for inspiration, lessons, feelings of solidarity and commonality as we face the unthinkable in Greece today.

⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

This exhaustion, I think, results from a series of persistent moves produced by and through the escalation of economic, social and political policies, crises and civic mobilizations. The riots of 2008, the occupation of Syntagma Square, protests against austerity measures and privatization, mass general strikes, the squatting of universities, hospitals, factories, theaters and schools, abandoned buildings, emerging neighborhood assemblies and support networks, alternative forms of exchange and values. Yet as Rosa Luxemburg once wrote, we are also aware of an historical series of defeats that emerges from “the contradiction in the early stages of the revolutionary process between the task being sharply posed and the absence of any preconditions to resolve it...” where a pile-up of blocks are the prerequisites and material for an on-going building.⁹ Our current stalling may also be due to a whiplash effect and subsequent weariness at the strident, spectacular rise of a state-sanctioned fascist organization patrolling our streets and parliament.

In facing these developments we have little time for hesitation or melancholic contemplation. We must address and resist how an historical series of defeats, betrayals, errors, and fascist gains generates a Left that still finds time to grieve. In her book *The Communist Horizon* Jodi Dean engages with Wendy Brown’s notion of resisting “left melancholia” for its opening up of possibilities regarding the rethinking of communist desire in the present. Dean nevertheless calls her out for diagnosing Walter Benjamin’s “left melancholy” as merely marking the condition of being more attached to a fixed political analysis and ideal or even its failure. Through a re-reading of Benjamin’s 1931 review of Erich Kästner’s poetry, “Left-Wing Melancholy,” Dean writes: “Benjamin’s account of left-wing melancholy suggests a loss of a different sort: the betrayal of revolutionary ideals...”¹⁰ Thinking communism as a “lost object”

through Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” Dean deepens her analysis of the left’s structure of feeling. For Dean, Freud’s well known differentiation between mourning and melancholia, where mourning’s response to loss can over time detach oneself from the lost object whereas melancholia is the persistent attachment to what is lost, sheds light on the ways the Left’s melancholic attachment and identification with itself as lost object comes to internalize and feed off the melancholic attachment itself. Dean seeks to emphasize “the compromise of the left melancholic” who in Benjamin’s words succumbs to “complacency and fatalism” resulting in the “metamorphosis of political struggle from a compulsory decision into an object of pleasure, from a means of production into an article of consumption.”¹¹ These relations can be understood as “cruelly optimistic” ones, where as Lauren Berlant writes, cruel optimism is that “double-bind in which your attachment to an object sustains you in life at the same time as that object is actually a threat to your flourishing.” Much like Dean’s admonishing of a collective melancholic attachment to communism as a lost object, Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism emphasizes that what is imperative is how we relate to objects, not the qualities of the objects themselves “but how we learn to be in relation,” that our object is relation.¹² Dean points to the phenomenon of the Occupy movements as relations that performed a rupture, a break from a melancholic resignation to capitalism’s inexorableness. Speaking from a US context Dean expresses her desire for an organized Left that, as she laments, the mobilizations and assemblies failed to bring about.

Yet, the attachment to a fixed ideal shaped by an acquiescence that looks back but cannot shape-shift according to the exigencies of the here and now is evidently present in contemporary Greek society. This was acutely felt while attending the improvised people’s assembly held in Syntagma

⁹ Rosa Luxemburg: “Order Prevails in Berlin”, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1919/01/14.htm>

¹⁰ Jodi Dean: *The Communist Horizon (Pocket Communism)*, New York 2012, p. 170.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.

¹² Interview with Lauren Berlant <http://societyandspace.com/2013/03/22/interview-with-lauren-berlant/>

square in the summer of 2011, an occupation in turn (pre)occupied with the specificities, particularities, and historical materialities of an enduring Greek Left. Moving in a 21st century agora the visceral sensing of the new – where one recognizes because it is made visible the malleability and ephemerality of context and convention, the work itself as it unfolds, the contingency that is the absence of a finished product, the presentness of the moment – was heightened. But I was also struck at how the language that sought to spew forth from this amorphous, acephalous forum was frozen in that Butlerian notion of ‘citational confinement’. Discourse and intonations that are obedient to the very institutions they seek to dismantle, deconstruct, reconstruct proliferate. Yet at the same time, among the assembly, as we all attempted to find ways to speak was the palpable ever-present trembling of potentiality. The improvised and impromptu assembly at Syntagma and the hundreds of neighbourhood assemblies it has subsequently discharged are performances of agoraphilia as is the people’s assembly currently forming in front of ERT’s headquarters. Crucial and inevitable moments and spaces that offer us ways to practice communication and communion as we still search for language while speaking to history and futurity. We must refuse complacency and compromise when these ruptures and breaks present themselves to us only to demand further constitution through and by us. We must refuse wallowing in left melancholia if we are to still search for, to cite Fred Moten citing Nathaniel Mackey, “new words, new worlds.”¹³

It is May 2013, exactly two years after the occupation of Syntagma square as I take an elevator up to the small fourth floor flat in an apartment building in the centre of Athens. A low row of seating pressed against a wall faces an open plan kitchen and living room and a glazed

¹³ Fred Moten: “Black Mo’nin”, in: *Loss: the Politics of Mourning*, David L. Eng, David Kazanjian (eds.), Berkeley 2003, p. 73.

bathroom door. We crouch down and wait for the performance to begin. Dead authors stare at the back of our heads from a ghostly row of black and white images tacked to the wall. We are about to witness an intimate domestic setting marked by the presence of zombies, blood, splattered spaghetti and tomato sauce, dissonant synthesized musicalizations of poetry, queer love, erotic dancing culminating in the critical vibrations of a screaming naked woman in body paint – dripping anarchy. An hour long performance of *mise en scenes* which alternated from B-horror movie moments, to tender poems and naked caresses, to poignant stillness and diminutive installations, to undulating Sapphic embraces in hand me down fur coats all set to Miltos Sahtouris’ collection of poetry on the subject of friendship, death and loss.

The performance *Ektoplasmata* (Ectoplasms) by the group *Nova Melancholia*, in refusing toxic normativity, ephemerally opened up through “new” ambivalent and improvisatory melancholias, the possibility for different relations between and re-arrangements of space, things and bodies. The public and private fold into each other in times of necessity and experimentation where as Berlant writes, “amidst all of the chaos, crisis, and injustice in front of us, the desire for alternative filters that produce the sense – if not the scene – of a more intimate, livable sociality is another name for the desire of the political.”¹⁴ In this case, due to the constraints of tiny budget performances that are offered for free to the public, the director Vassilis Noulas opens up his home to the public transforming it into a scene of another sociality and livability. This affective force of encounter plays out in the transformative scene of a kitchen counter, sink, living room floor as stage, the queering performance itself as well as the public entering the private sphere, producing a series of relations and becomings, in the spectators as well as the actors who play the dead and undead.

¹⁴ Lauren Berlant: *Cruel Optimism*, Durham 2010, p. 227.



EKTOPLASMATA © nova melancholia

For zombies echoingly stagger through Noulas' apartment as they haunt the streets of New York and London. Tavia Nyong'o, writing on the rehearsals and performances of zombie walks at the Wall Street and London Occupy movements observes how, framed by the architectures of finance, religion and state zombie walks show how we are "zombified" by capital at the same time as they release the potential for "de-zombification."¹⁵ The zombie marches traipsing through protest camps and the four female performers' enactment

¹⁵ Tavia Nyong'o: "The Scene of Occupation", in: TDR: The Drama Review 56:4 (T216) Winter 2012, p. 142.

of undead shuffles and splatters through Noulas' apartment become "an accumulation strategy for politicized, anarchic dances."¹⁶ I would like to think through Nyong'o's notion of "accumulation strategies for politicized, anarchic dances" as they release themselves on stages, balconies, in kitchens, riots, protests, general assemblies, smoke filled streets and through new "scenes of occupation" marked by politicized, anarchic stillness. A slow feel amongst the rage, poignancies that de-regulate temporality, linearity, space. For the many stillnesses that occurred beside the frenzy in Noulas' performance such the momentary corpses (and the breathtakingly beautiful moment of the tiny revolution of a small wooden mouse placed on a melting ice cube sliding in a pan heated by a butane gas can placed on the floor), as well as for the thunderous quietude of the "standing man." Yesterday a different image from the struggles taking place in Turkey made its appearance. Almost three weeks after constant battles with the police state a man stands still, alone, in a violently emptied square. He faces in the direction of massive banners bearing nationalist images and symbols and stands still for hours, relaxed, hands in his pockets, until he is joined by more and more people who imitate his stance, standing bodies, standing completely still in the square of Taksim, in the space that was and will be again a battlefield.¹⁷

We are haunted by these zombies and stillnesses that mark a refusal to disappear, that mark a refusal to not feel. This is not the first or last time that the living and the dead resist by taking such stands. These performances – the improvisations, experimentation, re-arrangements, needs, desires, impulses to re-animate found objects, materialities, histories, bodies and space, to respond to thwarted action – reveal how we are

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁷ See

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plaer_embedded&v=FnGfLI6scYY. For more images and interview see: <http://norhetorike.com/2013/06/19/interview-4-1-2-durankadin-the-standing-woman/>

haunted by new words and new worlds because they are always and already present.



http://www.rightnow.io/breaking-news/taksim-turkey_bn_1371374939596.html

The zombies, ghosts, and poetic eulogies made present in Noulas' small apartment and the images of standing singular bodies currently proliferating across the Turkish public sphere and our social media haunt, disrupt, unsettle, while sensed as known. Their specific and shared conditions of production, constraints and endurance reveal how in Avery Gordon words utopia "exists as more than a haunt":

It exists when there is no painful split between the dream world and the real world; when revolutionary time doesn't stop the world, but is rather a daily part of it; when needs and desires and investments are already being re-engineered; when a second nature or a sixth sensory organ has already grown and taken root. It exists when the

utopian is not the future as some absolute break from the past and the present, but a way of living in the here and now... It is the articulation of social movement in the general sense of the term: the ongoing building of an alternative civilization, with its own reason, its own home, and its own system of value.¹⁸

Gordon (and the above performances of "living in the here and now") magically show us avowals to be consciously haunted by the specter of utopia that is here, present. Utopia "exists as more than a haunt" because it is as socially real as feeling, as the material performances that summon it into existence. The stakes are high, the body is put on the line, profound risks and discomforts are endured in the daily living of the utopian. An all-encompassing melancholia, and it often is all-consuming, takes no risks, refuses to refuse its lost object, its attachment, itself. It allows for the succumbing to a solitary sadness that is pained by and turns away from the social. We must refuse a totalizing melancholia when it justifies resignation, when it is the predilection to withdraw from collective struggle and hope, admonish its indulgences as intellectual betrayals. The ugly feelings that spurred the writing of this paper seek to resist such a reading and feeling of the present and, without wanting to make light of the collective hardship and depression that abounds in the Greek public sphere these days, stems from a frustration with what feels like a current retreat from the fight.

And yet, interestingly and paradoxically, my desire for a minimal melancholia has necessarily moved through and across melancholic performances and feelings: the tears spilled when listening to poetry performed in small Athenian apartments, the melancholic tremble discerned in a zombie's cursed stumble, in images of resistance's silent stands. Our shared impossibility of immunity to melancholy necessitates a different relationship to it, necessitates its de-privileging, allowing its

¹⁸ Avery Gordon: *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People*, Boulder, London 2004, p. 129.

inevitability to bring us closer together instead of further apart. An opening up to its passing through, an opening up to feeling, an owning up to its being as intensity but not as property, to its coexistence and co-belonging with flows of affective rem(a)inders that spill over from performances of uneven divisions. Acts of resisting subjugation, whether bodily, linguistic, or affective, necessarily release forces that effuse from the collapse of the laws of the subject/object divide where in this disintegration desires flow and overflow from us at the same time the world and affects constitute us from outside ourselves. We stand in between, amongst, whilst unleashing affect, improvising, searching for a language for them and thus a world because of them, because of what haunts, because of what is possible. It is the unknown that brings us out of melancholy, the condition of not knowing, the renouncing of inevitabilities we know we have the agency to alter. Necessarily imagining, longing, envisioning and doing in the present without certitude is the vital experimentation with body, mind, space as resources whose capacities are infinite and mysterious. Knowing and not knowing is agency as initiation, instantiation, invitation to create forces, moves, performances, machines of the here and now and future, strategizing through what Douglas Crimp calls "mourning and militancy",¹⁹ new melancholias, new militancies, new anti-fascist actions.

For as I end here more images of precarious figures standing still together, eyes locked on the same horizon, spill over from the streets of Istanbul and other cities in Turkey. One image shows a young man stand on his knees next to an empty wheelchair, behind and alongside him an elderly woman and man, statuesque. Other images show groups of still figures materializing in the passages that are streets, throughways, feelings, affects, standing together but apart, facing the same direction, reading books, studying passages.

These self-conscious performances of differentiation, of singular and collective political being punctuating and thus creating spaces and times of social mobilization express feelings that refuse. And by refusing to not feel materially act as standpoints in response to thwarted action, to blockades. Near and far squares get filled, beaten and gassed into submission, emptied, filled again. We live and see huge processions, streams of protest, innovations, determinations, resilience, we live and see brutality and retaliation. We watch fascism changing faces and ways. We gather, assemble, plan, in spaces large and small, institutional, public and private, participate in desires made material, create and occupy new worlds, new words, intimacies, critically vibrating forms and sounds because of ugly and beautiful feelings. We hear of bodies fighting then standing deliberately still then fighting: we see bodies position themselves in excess of their opposition. Rem(a)inders flow. We hope. We are moved.

¹⁹ Douglas Crimp: "Mourning and Militancy", October 51 (1989): 3-18.

