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**“What’s the difference between an apartheid moustache and a GDR telephone?”<sup>1</sup>**

***Ostalgie*, melancholia and working-through the past in South Africa and Eastern  
Germany**

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<sup>1</sup> This was a question asked by a reviewer of an earlier version of this paper.

## **Abstract**

Both nostalgia and melancholia have been portrayed as psychological inabilities or refusals to mourn, coming to denote a common failure to have adapted to situations of social and political change. As such, both concepts have been used to either condemn the conditions they diagnose, or, alternatively, to hail them for their emancipatory potential. In this regard, both nostalgia and melancholia have been used effectively, separately and alongside one another, as instruments for political critique. But with this mutual opposition to mourning, melancholia and nostalgia have also been used in ways that make them almost interchangeable. In the absence of a detailed and direct comparison of these two concepts, this paper explores the differences and overlaps between melancholia and nostalgia, as well as the different kinds of analyses of post-transition societies they enable. This is achieved through the juxtaposition of a particular regularity in post-apartheid South African popular culture, Afrikaner self-parody, which is characterized as melancholic, with what has frequently been called *Ostalgie*, nostalgia for the German Democratic Republic.

**Key words:** nostalgia, *Ostalgie*, German Democratic Republic, melancholia, post-apartheid South Africa, Afrikaner, parody, psychoanalysis

## Introduction

We want to pose a fairly straightforward question here, one concerning the difference between melancholia and nostalgia, particularly with regards to how these two concepts are, and can be, deployed in studies of post-transition societies. They have different genealogies, melancholia and nostalgia – the former being linked to the medieval discourse of *acedia*, slothfulness (Agamben, 1993), the latter, as is well known, to *heimweh*, homesickness, or the pain of longing for home. In the contemporary deployment of these two concepts, though, they have become mutually constituted in opposition to mourning, as similar psychological inabilities or refusals to mourn, coming to denote a mutual failure to have adapted to situations of social and political change.

As such, both melancholia and nostalgia are used to either condemn the conditions they diagnose (as regressive, as unwillingness or inability to engage with the past critically), or, alternatively but less frequently, to hail them for their emancipatory potential (for their demand that a loss be acknowledged and a more just society be constructed from the ruins of the past). In this regard, both concepts have been used effectively, separately and alongside one another, as instruments for political critique. But with this mutual opposition to mourning, melancholia and nostalgia have also been used in ways that make them almost interchangeable. Consider, for example, the way Achille Mbembe (2008) writes of poor whites in post-apartheid South Africa:

Since 1994 and the advent of globalization, they are forced to compete with blacks in an unstable labor market without the privilege of their whiteness. No wonder they cling so tightly to the symbolic vestiges of a racist past as a way of softening their newfound material precariousness. *Consumed by nostalgia and melancholia, they cannot imagine what it means to be white in Africa without the*

*paraphernalia of apartheid* (the church, the national-Christian ideology, the army, black servants, and so on) (p. 14, emphasis added).

It may be pedantic to insist on the disentanglement of melancholia and nostalgia here; the potential problem, though, is that in their mutual opposition to mourning the past – in this instance the racist apartheid past – nostalgia and melancholia frequently become fused, collapsing their conceptual differences. If we consider that, as Mbembe suggests, both conditions figure a clinging to the past, or a failure to have imagined life without this past, what exactly is melancholic here, and what nostalgic? Is the clinging of melancholia and that of nostalgia somehow different? As concepts for apprehending a relation to the past, what are the different dimensions of that relation that are thrown into relief by nostalgia and by melancholia? And what would a working-through of this failure to mourn entail when framed on the one hand as melancholia, and on the other as nostalgia?

To complicate this last question, in Freud's later (1923) 'The Ego and the Id,' where he amended his initial (1917) formulation in 'Mourning and Melancholia,' melancholia is depathologised, becoming mourning's psychic condition of possibility; indeed, melancholia becomes a kind of interminable mourning, forever devoted to the lost object even if in dissimulated rage against it. Likewise, nostalgia has sometimes been portrayed as being able to do some of the memory-work of working-through a sociopolitical transition (e.g. Oushakine, 2007, 2000). How, then, are melancholia and nostalgia thought to offer a means of working-through the loss of a national past?

Surprisingly, there has not yet been a detailed and direct comparison of these two concepts and the conditions they construct (cf. Scribner, 2003), and this paper is an attempt to begin such a mapping of the differences and overlaps between melancholia and nostalgia, not only of the different conditions they diagnose, but also the different kinds of analyses of post-

transition societies they enable. Our method of doing this has been to juxtapose a particular regularity in post-apartheid South African popular culture, Afrikaner self-parody, which we characterize as melancholic, with nostalgia for the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (German Democratic Republic, GDR).

The GDR, established in 1949 as a socialist state in the Soviet-occupied zone of post-war Germany, formally ceased to exist in 1990 after reunification with Western Germany. For many Eastern Germans the initial enthusiasm about newly-gained freedoms and privileges was soon accompanied, or partially superseded, by the realisation that the end of the GDR also entailed a loss – a loss of relationships, of material and social practices, of an identity. A longing for the material reality of the GDR is further aggravated by the fact that “the GDR has literally vanished from the political map” (Betts, 2000, p. 734), which means that one can only access the country by way of remembering. It is thus an “indissoluble combination of spatial and temporal desires that trigger nostalgia” (Huysen, 2006, p. 7).

With the demise of communism as a viable political alternative and the demand by historiographers to officially classify the GDR as an *Unrechtsstaat*, i.e. a state ruled by injustice,<sup>2</sup> official narratives left little space for private reminiscences. Looking back at the GDR with longing began to be regarded as a regressive endeavour, and the phenomenon of Eastern Germans engaging in nostalgia was naturally regarded with suspicion. It was even granted its own name: *Ostalgie*, an amalgamation of the German words for East, *Osten* and nostalgia, *Nostalgie*. Critics of *Ostalgie* emphasized the nostalgic’s hankering after a “narcissistic illusion for a missing gratification or a deflection from current unpleasant circumstances” (Stewart, 1984 in Nikelly, 2004, p. 184) and accused Eastern Germans of engaging in “selective amnesia” (Cooke, 2005, p. 8) in relation to their collective past, thereby hindering the process of Germany’s ‘inner unification.’

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<sup>2</sup> *Der Tagesspiegel* online edition, 24.05.2009

The way Eastern Germans have been marooned in a new political and economic order is, to a degree, comparable with the position Afrikaners have occupied since the dismantlement of apartheid in 1994.<sup>3</sup> While Afrikaner nationalism was once synonymous with South Africanness, the post-apartheid nation has been constituted and an *anti*-apartheid nation. Afrikaner self-parody has its origins in the late 1980s anti-apartheid Voëlvry movement, a collective of Afrikaner musicians who ridiculed and parodically doubled whatever was sacred to Afrikanerdom, doing so at a time when real cracks in the apartheid edifice began showing. The irony so characteristic of Voëlvry has become prolific over the past few years in post-apartheid South Africa, evident in various Afrikaner subcultural movements, from *Bitterkomix* (Barnard, 2004), to the performances of comedians, Corné and Twakkie of *The Most Amazing Show* (TMAS) at Oppikoppi music festival (Truscott, 2011), and the popularity of Bellville rock band, Fokofpolisiekar (Bezuidenhout 2007). It is, however, exemplified in the rise of zef culture and the popularity of zef musicians, Jack Parow and Die Antwoord.

The term zef is derived from the Ford Zephyr, a model popular with working-class Afrikaners during the late 1950s and early 1960s. As such, it is commonly associated with ‘poor white’ Afrikaners, with a ‘white-trash’ aesthetic. There has been criticism directed at zef, often simply as a reflex reaction to the reappearance of various signifiers of the old country, but most often emphasizing the vulgar content of the performances – the swearing, fighting, drinking and sex that are a part of its parodies. However, zef has generally been understood by its audience and by those writing about it as critical of that which it

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<sup>3</sup> It should be emphasised here that no attempt is being made to equate the nature of the two regimes, although it could be pointed out that the two are intertwined in various ways. The GDR had a large state security apparatus (colloquially known as the ‘Stasi’, the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit’s manpower proportionately outnumbered that of the Soviet Union) and lacked many basic democratic freedoms. However, there were also a number of important features that many of its former citizens would have liked to retain, such as free childcare, free education and an impressive employment rate for women. Perhaps more relevant for the present discussion, the GDR regime supported anti-colonial struggles in Africa, and retained close connections with the ANC both in South Africa and abroad, supporting the anti-Apartheid movement financially and logistically.

appropriates and repeats. Parody, it should also be noted, has become a fairly prominent feature of post-apartheid popular culture and art (see, for examples, Garb, 2011; Nuttall, 2008; Coombes, 2003); what is focused on below, though, is the parody of Afrikanerdom by Afrikaners, likening this self-parody to the self-beratement of melancholia, a symptom that declares a loss that cannot be eulogised, in this instance the loss of apartheid and who Afrikaners were able to be during that time.

By looking at zef as an instance of melancholia, and at *Ostalgie* as an instance of nostalgia, we have chosen not to compare melancholia and nostalgia in the abstract, but as socially located phenomena. This comparison of specific instances of contemporary melancholia and nostalgia has been, then, both the limitation of this paper and its enabling condition. The paper stands, in this way, as a theoretical reflection on, rather than a detailed analysis of, these phenomena, though we draw from two more sustained, empirically grounded research projects on them.

A part of the difference between the melancholia and nostalgia that emerges here derives, no doubt, from the the political differences between post-apartheid South Africa and reunified Germany; indeed, the afterlives of the GDR and apartheid are markedly different. The comparison of these two phenomena in two different national contexts, therefore, cannot but highlight, also, how very different apartheid, as a political system, was from the GDR. Our primary objective, though, is to use German and South African popular culture to dramatize the differences and overlaps between melancholia and nostalgia, two conditions that exist at the intersection of the psychic and the social, whose cardinal features, we want to suggest, are exemplified by the vicissitudes of the apartheid moustache and the GDR telephone, respectively. Let us now turn to GDR *Ostalgie*, then to post-apartheid melancholia, from which point we will conclude with direct responses to our guiding questions posed above.



### ***Ostalgie* and post-socialist nostalgia**

In the original conceptualization of nostalgia as a medical disorder it was intimately linked to a notion of space, a reaction to the loss of a homeland, and *heimweh* retains this meaning, whereas nostalgia itself has moved to the “interiority of the human subject” (Casey, 1987, p. 371), and is now used to speak of a longing for a place in time, a place that perhaps never quite was. In its non-pathological conceptualisation, nostalgia has been theorised as a coping mechanism enabling individuals to come to terms with major changes in their biographies. However, the move from the working-through of a loss to becoming marooned in the past is easily realised, and the individual’s position on this spectrum often merely a matter of definition. The ‘magical thinking’ that is such an important element of nostalgic reverie, that is, the temporary suspension of the reality principle, has strong narcissistic elements, as it allows the ego to “regress into memories and fantasies of long ago” (Nikelly, 2004, p. 184). If engaged in excessively, it can lead to a withdrawal from the present and “atrophy in ego development” (Ibid.).

Assuming that any loss is perceived as potentially threatening to the ego and can be deflected by nostalgia through “marshalling our psychological resources for continuity” (Davis, 1979, pp. 34-35), what are the consequences of the disintegration of an entire societal order? In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym (2001) concludes that mechanisms activated by such processes are in fact much the same. In 1990s Russia, “Nostalgia became a defence mechanism against the accelerated rhythm and the economic shock therapy” (p. 65). Lowenthal (1985) echoes this sentiment in more general terms by remarking how “Nostalgia reaffirms identities bruised by recent turmoil” (p. 13).

Post-socialist nostalgia has come to be defined in both negative and positive terms – either as a conservative striving for past glories, or as a coping mechanism enabling a

coming-to-terms with the transformations and disruptions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both incarnations are regarded as symptomatic of the post-socialist condition, a result of the losses entailed in the transition from one economic and societal model to another. Boym illustrates this twofold potential in her theorization of post-socialist nostalgia as potentially *restorative* or *reflective*, which will be introduced later on. Whatever one's assessment, it must be conceded that the response to nostalgia depends on the collective verdict placed on the past one is nostalgic about. In a conflicted setting such as that of post-unification Germany, where there is no consensus as to how we must look back at 40 years of GDR history, the investments of various sides, both Eastern and Western German, are played out in the arena of collective remembrance.

We previously mentioned that *Ostalgie* is frequently portrayed in an overwhelmingly negative light, as a reaction of “narcissistic withdrawal” (Oushakine, 2000, p. 1011). In its reliance on visceral sensations, and its resistance to attempts at rationalisation, nostalgia can be open to manipulation; as such, many are suspicious of its potential as a sense-making tool. In this regard, two manifestations of *Ostalgie* have attracted the greatest amount of attention: its comedic treatment of the past, and its subsequent commodification. The criticism these suffered is indicative of the *Ostalgie* debate as a whole, the broad strokes of which are worth recounting for illustrative purposes.

The success of Wolfgang Becker's film *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) appeared to legitimize a more light-hearted approach to the GDR and a number of entertainment TV shows attempted to adopt its style. In strong contrast to previous programmes, which had mainly dealt with the regime's oppressive side, shows such as the *Ostalgie Show*, *Die Ultimative Ost-Show* and the *DDR Show* paid particular attention to fashion, popular

entertainment and consumer items produced in the GDR.<sup>4</sup> Ostensibly, they aimed to perpetuate a more positive perspective on the GDR, presenting it as a place that can be looked back upon with fondness. Yet the programmes' detractors complained that the shows failed to engage critically with GDR history, doing nothing to further an understanding of what it meant to live in the GDR. The conclusion many drew from the programmes' success is that *Ostalgie* is nothing but a repetition compulsion, whose employment of various fetish objects represents a refusal to remember the regime's unsavoury aspects, and should therefore be dismissed altogether.

However, the counterargument to be introduced here is that by looking at the past almost exclusively "through the prism of present-day consumer values" (Cooke, 2005, p. 163), no genuine mourning of the past was ever meant to be facilitated. In fact, the shows' attempts at 're-exoticising the normal' served to reinforce a hierarchy in which the GDR was seen as inferior, laughable even, thereby stripping the regime of any positive, emancipatory potential it might have had. The following section argues that another facet of post-socialist nostalgia, namely 'museums of the everyday,' demonstrate how the preservation and careful display of material objects can serve as an "intermediary between collective and individual memory" (Boym, 2001, p. 54), thereby enabling one modality of working through.

The first, the *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur* in Eisenhüttenstadt, was created in 1993 and now houses over 150.000 original GDR objects. It "collects and secures these documents of cultural, social and everyday history. The objects are bound up with experiences of everyday life in the East German part of society. They, like the material

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<sup>4</sup> One journalist summarized the shows in the following manner: "The principle of a GDR show is easily explained: you take a studio with a live audience, decorate it as colourfully as possible, using lots of GDR items, put two presenters on the stage (preferably one Eastern German and one Western German) and then let as many eastern celebrities chat about the 'good old times, when perhaps not everything, but lots of things were better' [...]. Every now and then the obligatory *Trabbi* rolls across the screen; the whole thing is accompanied by hits from the East German charts; West Germans are made to guess the most common abbreviations of GDR-speak, and every now and again 'original footage from back then' is shown. Add a pinch of *Ostalgie* and mix it with *Spreewald* gherkins, *FKK* holidays and *FDJ* summer camps – and there you have it, the *Ost-Show* is complete!" (Antonia Kränzlin, 'Wie baut man sich seine DDR?', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 21 August 2003, author's translation)

remnants themselves, are part of social memory.”<sup>5</sup> The second, *DDR Museum Zeitreise* (‘GDR Timetravel Museum’),<sup>6</sup> opened in Radebeul in 2006 with the comparable aim of offering an insight into many facets of everyday life in the GDR.

This may be a suitable point at which to return to the distinction between *restorative* and *reflective* nostalgia first made by Boym (2001). Whereas the former seeks to rebuild the *nostos*, the lost home, the latter dwells on *algia*, the experience of longing. Restorative nostalgia aims to return to, or recover a former state of perceived greatness and is inherently conservative, while reflective nostalgia is a form of meditation, an engagement with the past that frequently involves humour and irony. By recreating a spatial semblance of the GDR, we could be engaging in both forms of nostalgia: we are “cherishing the shattered fragments” of the past, but through an attempt to reassemble these fragments into a more coherent setting, are we not also trying to “conquer and spatialize time”? (Boym, 2001, p. 49) Depending on how and by whom this attempt at setting a nostalgic scene, at staging memory, is received, it could be interpreted as a defiant gesture (‘the country we were born in may be gone, but this is proof that it did exist’) or, alternatively, as a sign of ‘arrested development’ (Scribner, 2003, p. 27).

Both museums state their aim in terms of facilitating private and social memory by recreating typical GDR settings such as classrooms, shops, living rooms or kitchens – creating an at times almost uncanny sensation of being transported back in time: “for it is not the securing of the material world that activates remembrance, but rather our collective displacement and reassessment of these things” (Scribner, 2003, p. 43).

The nostalgic may resist the demands of reality in two ways: one is as a refusal to fully acknowledge the impossibility of returning to a past self, using the museum’s artefacts in an act of fetishistic disavowal. The second type is a resistance to the ambivalences of

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<sup>5</sup> From museum’s website <http://www.alltagskultur-ddr.de/pages/dok/dok.html>, accessed 26.03.2012.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ddr-museum-dresden.de/cod/php/ddr-museum.php>

history and nationhood, as implied in Boym's definition of the restorative nostalgic, who "proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" (Boym, 2001, p. 41).<sup>7</sup> She goes on to say that "restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments from the past" (Ibid.). The museums seemingly bridge the gap between past and present by allowing visitors to encounter, or re-find 'lost objects' (a task made much easier by the limited amount of consumer goods available in the GDR). In Boym's words "distance is compensated by intimate experience and the availability of a desired object. Displacement is cured by a return home, preferably a collective one" (p. 44). Does this mean we have to characterize these spaces as inherently regressive?

The artefacts on display serve as repositories of affect, and at their most powerful they can set into motion certain psychic processes that provide a type of 'hallucinatory gratification' by blurring the boundaries between past and present. Being of both material and phantasmatic nature, they are not up to the task of setting up a serious confrontation with history. At the same time, the objects' fundamentally private nature also means that they do not make a larger gesture that would call for their assemblage into a more coherent, permanent whole. Indeed, one might argue that the gathering of so many personal artefacts in one place can enable one modality of working-through a loss. The two GDR museums discussed survive on donations of objects, large and small, made by the public. Cannot the allocation of everyday artefacts to a museum be seen as a way of laying these objects to rest, of removing them so they can no longer trouble us? By assigning them a separate space, we register the fact that they once had a place in our lives, while simultaneously acknowledging that they cannot be re-animated, brought back to life. In fact, this is how Slavoj Žižek (2008) defines the very phenomenon of *Ostalgie*, which to him "is not a real longing for the GDR,

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<sup>7</sup> Boym insists that this category of nostalgics "do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth" (p. 41).

but the enactment of a real parting from it, the acquiring of a distance, detraumatization” (p. 64).

Thought of in this manner, the museum’s artefacts become reminiscent of Donald Winnicott’s psychoanalytic notion of the *transitional object*, which, by providing an intermediate space unchallenged by the reality principle (the reality of the loss), can offer the means of leaving “the internal domain of imaginary experience (i.e. projections and fantasies) in order to enter the external domain of social activity” (Oushakine, 2000, p. 1008). According to Oushakine, transitional objects only realize their more problematic potential in a situation of structural uncertainty such as that of post-Soviet Russia, at which point these objects, as well as the transition itself, can become institutionalized. In Eastern Germany, both the future map and political system of the country had been pre-determined, allowing for a playful, self-determined use of these objects. This turns them into a type of coping mechanism, creating a refuge from “oppressive cultural conditions” (Wilson, 2005, p. 34) which tend to represent the GDR past either as fodder for mockery, or solely in terms of the repressive nature of its regime.

If we thus concede that the museums function as sites that acknowledge the loss or gap left by the end of the GDR, there seems good reason to join Boym in seeking to rehabilitate post-socialist nostalgia, at least in its reflective incarnation, as it “reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection” (p. 49). Those accusing East Germans of engaging in solipsistic nostalgia as a way of disavowing the problematic aspects of their former regime display that same lack of scope for ambivalence, as well as a fundamental tendency to ‘orientalize’ East Germans (Cooke, 2005). In other words, a certain conception of *Ostalgie* is in fact being sustained so that the concept of forward-looking, ‘enlightened’ Germans can emerge against this backdrop. In light of Germany’s history of the

20<sup>th</sup> century, the desire to create a clear-cut narrative that condemns a regime that committed crimes against its citizens is certainly understandable. However, in the case of GDR history, it appears that memory politics are in fact disguised identity politics whereby the historical victor dictates the conditions of remembering. The two museums are offered as one way of articulating a loss which finds almost no recognition in contemporary German politics of national memory.

Returning to the initial theorisation of nostalgia in opposition to mourning, one might be tempted to expect that, once individuals have relinquished material objects to a museum, decathected their affective investments in them, and acknowledged the irretrievability of the past, they will be cured of *Ostalgie*. This, however, would be a misleading conclusion. Nikelly (2004) points out that the initial investment in the object, be it a parental figure or one's country of birth, was most likely of an ambivalent nature, and that nostalgic feelings are frequently borne out of an attempt to retain the positive attachment, and resist the resolution of this tension that mourning would require. A regime as contradictory as that of the GDR can only have increased this ambivalence, and one could therefore conjecture that the tension that creates *Ostalgie* is both *external*, that is, the injunction to remember the GDR in a certain manner, and *internal*, that is, the inability to reconcile the different facets that made up the GDR. The museums represent a way of managing this nostalgia, of giving it space without allowing it to proliferate.

### **Afrikaner self-parody as a form of post-apartheid melancholia**

From the above, nostalgia emerges as a denial of a loss, but also a kind of defence mechanism against the trauma of a loss, and melancholia shares these features. In 'Mourning and Melancholia,' Freud (1917) famously proposed melancholia, in contradistinction to mourning, as a disavowal of the loss of an object, whether a loved person, an ideal or one's

country. The central argument regarding melancholia is that, in the face of an object-cathexis that is no longer possible, and in order to prolong psychically this attachment, the object is withdrawn into the ego, establishing “an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object” (p. 249). The compromise of melancholia, then, is *being* the lost object rather than *having* it, this being melancholia’s mode of clinging, the ego treats itself as the object.

This dynamic of melancholia is well put by Judith Butler’s (1997) pithy formulation: “Melancholia is a rebellion that has been put down, crushed” (p. 190). That is, an ambivalent relation to a lost object becomes a crushed rebellion: identification with the lost object fulfils the loving portion of the ambivalent relation – *longing for the object’s return* – and the incorporation of the object is a rebellion against the reality of a loss, a rebellion that is put down by conscience, which fulfils the hateful portion – *rage at its departure, hate at having been abandoned*. This produces the characteristic melancholic symptom of self-beratement, the attacks on the ego by its own critical agency, allowing a relation to a lost object to live on as an intra-psychic conflict. The ego, though, as Butler suggests, will never be a wholly satisfying substitute, thus intensifying the rage against the ego-as-object for its inadequacy. While the pain of mourning takes the form of grief for the lost object, the pain of melancholia is presented in a conflicted relation between two parts of the ego. Melancholia, that is to say, is an unconscious loss, a loss not experienced as loss, but, rather, as the perception of oneself as wretched, as worthless.

There is clearly some disparity between what is proposed below as a form of sociopolitical melancholia and the typical presentation of clinical melancholia. However, Freud’s (1917) paper on the complications of loss frames well the situation in which many young Afrikaners find themselves in post-apartheid South Africa. The emergence of Afrikaner self-parody does coincide with sweeping political changes, supporting the hypothesis of loss being an aetiological factor in Afrikaner self-parody, providing good



reason to frame it as a form of melancholia. It is useful in this regard to refer to two related points Melissa Steyn (2001) makes in “*Whiteness Just Isn’t What It Used to Be*,” the first book length study of post-apartheid South African whiteness. As her title makes clear, the story she tells is one “about displacement, about the subjective experience of dispossession” (p. 153). There have been for white South Africans, particularly Afrikaners, Steyn argues, various kinds of losses – of a sense of home, of autonomy and control, of guaranteed legitimacy, honour and face. Because of this, Steyn argues – and this is her second point – “White South Africans are grieving for what just *isn’t what it used to be*” (pp. 155-156, emphasis in original).

While conceding Steyn’s first point, *grieving the loss of apartheid is precisely what white South Africans are not doing*. And they are not doing so precisely because apartheid is not an object over which grief is authorized; it is, rather, in Butler’s (1997) words, a loss that is “unspeakable, impossible to declare” (p. 196) – this in stark contrast to the GDR.<sup>8</sup> The constitution of the post-apartheid nation through a break with its own past has provided the conditions of post-apartheid belonging, and the commandment of the post-apartheid nation is to “recognise the past as an injustice,” as the preamble to the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996) interpellates post-apartheid subjects. We can formulate this as a constitutionally entrenched cultivation of post-apartheid melancholia precisely because, with the injunction to remember a national past as an injustice, apartheid becomes unmournable: to

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<sup>8</sup> Charity Scribner (2003) illustrates precisely how different the two contexts, Eastern Germany and South Africa, are in terms of mourning the loss of the past. As Scribner states, “In 1996 an obituary for the ideals of socialism appeared on the streets of Berlin. Framed in a black border, the notice invited the public to join a funeral procession that led from the Memorial Church in the western half of the city to the ‘Cemetery of the Welfare State’ that had been temporarily marked out in the East. The artists who orchestrated this performance struck a peculiar chord – one that resonated not only in Germany, but in the rest of Europe as well. For although many Europeans considered the project to build a workers’ state to be a failure, they have proceeded to mourn its collapse, nonetheless” (p. 3). Consider an obituary for the ideals of apartheid, or collective sorrow for racially separate development; it is simply unthinkable, and so, too, is the mourning of the death of apartheid. Grief over this loss is not permitted, not openly, not publically, and it is this prohibition that forces this grief into a subterranean afterlife.

be ‘authentically South African’ – and this would, no doubt, be a desire of the key proponents of zef and its audience – apartheid should not be a loss at all; the end of apartheid can only be a sign of progress, and those who lament the loss of apartheid become ‘the other from the past’ against which the post-apartheid nation has constituted itself. This is not to say apartheid was not an injustice; it is, however, to suggest that there is a melancholic blockage here, a paucity of symbols with which to register this loss, the result being that one can mourn the loss of apartheid only with great difficulty, alone or in private, at the risk of a certain ‘political insanity,’ and by assuming a place of abject national otherness.

Of course, not everyone in South Africa has become melancholic. Freud (1917) suggested that the preconditions for melancholia are an existing ambivalence towards the lost object, and that the loss be of a narcissistic sort, both of which fit the situation being considered here. The diagnosis of Afrikaner self-parody as a form of melancholia is supported by the fact that it is precisely the features of apartheid-era white masculinity, particularly Afrikaner masculinity – those problematised in post-apartheid South Africa, this problematisation rendering them lost as models on which to fashion oneself, lost, that is, as the narcissistic support for white Afrikaner masculinities – that are ridiculed in the parodic performances. This is captured well in Jack Parow’s words, in a rare, although not complete stepping out of parodic character:

Well, the zef image is me, its how I grew up and how I have been classified my entire life, being from behind the boerewors curtain. So yes, I am making a statement to say that we aren’t as bad as everyone makes us out to be. But at the same time I’m also ripping off my friends and myself because we are dysfunctional and rough as fuck.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Interview with Jack Parow,’ *Mail & Guardian, Friday*, 26 February – 4 March, 2010, p. 3.

The self-parody that characterizes these articulations of contemporary Afrikaner culture can, then, be read as a form of melancholic self-beratement, as a means for retaining a relation to a problematized past. Instead of relinquishing those aspects of Afrikaner culture stained by the apartheid past, these same aspects are introjected and turned against. In this abasement of what one is – in Parow’s words, of ‘how I grew up and how I have been classified my entire life’ – there is the rebellion of an identification with a lost object; this identification, however, is put down by parody, relegating the lost or forbidden object identified with to the status of a joke, ensuring an ironic afterlife for a lost object that cannot be mourned, an afterlife that is better than the devastation of a total loss.

Freud suggested that the ambivalent struggle of melancholia plays itself out over memory-traces of the object. In this regard, although seemingly trivial, we should take the moustache and its emblematic place amongst the assemblage of recycled and ridiculed apartheid-era artefacts in zef seriously. It is a minor detail of the past, a harmless trifle; but, as Sonja Smit (2011) notes in her analysis of Jack Parow, “The 1980s moustache recalls the politically fraught period before the end of Apartheid. The look is unfashionably connected to images of the white Afrikaans male as conservative, Calvinist and nationalist with an ingrained sense of racial superiority (p. 3). Through the appropriation of the moustache, wearing it ironically, in a way that not only makes fun of the past from which it comes, but also declares ‘we are dysfunctional and rough as fuck,’ there is at play a melancholic dynamic, one wherein these young Afrikaners have failed to relinquish a forbidden past, have clung to it in the dual sequence of melancholia. That is to say, rather than being mourned, the loss of the object, and an ambivalent relation to it, is represented *symptomatically*, in identification and self-beratement.

While the self-parodying melancholic subject cannot, because of the nature of anti-apartheid post-apartheid nationalism, mourn apartheid, the resolution of melancholia still lies, at least if we follow the Freud of ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ in letting go of the loved and hated object. This severing of the tie to the object, and laying it to rest, freeing up the libido to form new attachments is, however, complicated and prolonged indefinitely by the identification with the object: in the internal theatre of melancholia, an initiation of the relinquishment of the object is performed, each denigration of the ego loosening the attachment to the object; the performance, though, is a perpetual rehearsal of the loss, one in which the identification with the object takes the two actors, the ego and its critical agency, back to their starting places to repeat the sequence, reversing the severance initiated. As Jack Parrow states at the end of the song, ‘Die Vraagstuk’ (the question), “If you’re looking for me, I’m the guy at the bar with the moustache,”<sup>10</sup> providing the point from which the self-parodying sequence will start again in an identification with this memory-trace of the lost past.

An end to this, though, Freud (1917) insisted, is possible. Melancholia, that is to say, either denigrates and disparages the ego until it has killed off the lost object, or until it has exhausted love and hate for the object. And it is this that Freud saw as the threat of suicide in melancholia, as the only way to be truly rid of the lost object, to sever the attachment, is to kill oneself. What is required of the melancholic, then, if they are not to follow the lost object into the grave, is the impossible task of “killing the dead” (Leader, 2003, p. 26) with whom one has identified, without killing oneself.

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<sup>10</sup> In the original Afrikaans, “*As jy vir my soek, ek’s die ou by die bar met die snor.*” ‘Die Vraagstuk’ is a song by Die Heuwel’s Fantasties (2009) featuring Parow rapping. Many of the people who appear in the video are wearing ‘real’ or fake moustaches; moustaches also form an integral part of comedians, Corné and Twakkie’s parodic performances (see Truscott, 2011). It should be noted, though, that while ‘Die Vraagstuk,’ in terms of the lyrics and the tone of the song, the feeling that emanates from it, are open to quite different readings, and despite that this feeling is overwhelmingly one of wanting to be a part of the post-apartheid nation, this does not mean that the essential gesture of the song is not one of melancholia. Indeed, it is precisely because the people in the video implicitly declare their South Africanness that they might be said to be melancholic: as an ‘authentic South African’ one cannot mourn apartheid, and it is apartheid that is being parodied here.

It is here that Freud's (1917) view of a bounded, pre-constituted subject that can survive its losses comes starkly into view. As noted in the introduction, in 'The Ego and the Id' Freud (1923) quite radically reformulates loss and its effect on the subject. Firstly, he depathologises the substitution of an object-cathexis for an identification with the lost object, suggesting that it may be the very condition of the ego giving up its lost objects, but also of psychic life in general. Freud remarks, in this regard, 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). Or, as Butler (1997) puts it, commenting on this passage, the ego is no more than "the sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archaeological remainder, as it were, of unresolved grief" (p. 133). The ego, in Freud's later (1923) formulation, then, is nothing other than the residue of its incomplete mourning, the character of the ego precisely and only the effect of its ungrievable losses, an assemblage of fragments and traces of losses it cannot articulate. Loss or separation, in this sense, constitutes the ego (Butler, 1997).

The kind of identification that was pathologized in 'Mourning and Melancholia' becomes, in 'The Ego and the Id,' something along the lines of a memorial to the lost object. Indeed, melancholia's sequence – identification and self-beratement – simulates, at the level of fantasy, the loss of the object as it has taken place in the social world, internalizes it, rehearses it and replays it. Applied to zef, too strong a fidelity to Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' can lead one to overlook this memorializing aspect of melancholia, and adopt an overly condemning or pathologizing position. Regressive identification, pathologized in the earlier paper, may even be, as Freud (1923) enthuses, a kind of sublimation. Whether or not zef is a creative sublimation of the loss of apartheid is open to debate, but certainly Freud's later writings alert us to the fact that, even if zef is read as a kind of melancholia, it may entail a kind of interminable mourning where the repository into which lost objects have

been put to rest – the ‘museum’ that memorializes the lost object, and thereby enables one to carry on in the present – is the ego itself.

## **Conclusion**

Let us conclude by reiterating the key dynamics shared by nostalgia and melancholia, as well as what sets them apart. Firstly, both conditions entail a conjuring of the lost object’s presence, and a kind of primary process hallucinatory gratification in this. Secondly, the losses out of which melancholia and nostalgia are produced are frequently of a narcissistic type, perceived as a threat by the ego; as such, both are seen to operate as forms of defence, protecting the ego from the trauma of the loss, and from the inability to resolve the ambivalence that either characterised the initial object-relation, or has been produced as an effect of the loss. Third, both nostalgia and melancholia, at least in the instances we have considered here, entail a fixation on the minute details of the everyday past, seemingly without political charge but associatively linked to more serious aspects of the lost past. Furthermore, as melancholia and nostalgia frequently involve humorous or ironic recitations of the past, they simulate the creation of distance from these objects and artefacts, relegating them to a domain outside of serious, real life.

However, it is from examining their forms of display that we can gain an understanding of how nostalgia and melancholia differ. The aforementioned GDR telephone, when presented in the setting of the GDR museums, is no longer operational, cannot be reintroduced into everyday life, does not work, and has been relinquished to the museum as an acknowledgement of this, both in practical and symbolic terms – in Scribner’s (2003) words, the GDR telephone is able to “hibernate, albeit within view” (p. 34). At the same time, it is endowed with a new function; in this capacity it becomes the site of the visitors’

projections, a temporary escape from the reality of the loss, which is subsequently re-enacted upon leaving this ‘transitional space.’

The same dynamic is approximated in post-apartheid melancholia, but this process is complicated; the repository, the ‘museum of the melancholic,’ is the ego itself, housing, to use Butler’s (1997) words, the archaeological remainders of unresolved grief over the loss of the apartheid past. The mode of depositing the object, of both clinging to and relinquishing it, is to identify with a trace of the object that has been lost. The moustache, in this regard, is the exemplary memory-trace of the past in zef as post-apartheid melancholia, a trace through which this dynamic plays out. The moustache becomes a part of the identity of the subject, repetitively repudiated, relinquished, laid to rest in the irony with which it is worn – and in the very gesture of wearing it ironically, out of time, its pastness is declared – but the lost object haunts the subject who has identified with it, and thereby laid it to rest, the subject themselves becoming a living breathing spectre of the past, at the threshold of the dead and the living. While we speak here of the ego as a kind of ‘melancholic museum,’ and also of GDR museums as ‘locations of identity’ – and in this way we demarcate the common ground between these two conditions – we hope this also marks out the quite distinct relations to the past these two concepts grapple with.

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