

Writing the Melancholic: The Dynamics of Melancholia in Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun*

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Abstract

In this paper, rather than repeating the efforts of other scholars who explore more widely disseminated Kristevan concepts such as the semiotic, the *chora*, or the abject, I examine Kristeva's more recent theoretical formulations in *Black Sun*. Reading her theory of melancholia in the larger context of her theory of signifying practice, I argue that Kristeva employs the prediscursive melancholy economy and the maternal Thing to arrive at a different understanding of what counts as art and literature in cultural practices. One of the main concerns of this paper is to explore the dynamic encounter between writing and melancholia in Kristeva's *Black Sun*. The explicit relation between the two—Kristeva opposes the “artistic” or “writing cure” to melancholia—constitutes at once the most dynamic, therapeutic, and yet the most problematic aspect of Kristeva's theory. For here her theory runs the risk of a dangerous circularity, that of returning women to the patriarchal symbolic order that contributed to the production of female melancholia in the first place. Therefore this paper, “The Writing of the Melancholic,” is a critique which aims to sharpen our awareness of the hidden assumptions or conceptual limits embedded in Kristeva's conceptualization of melancholia, a gender study which hopes to lay bare a certain gender bias that structures Kristeva's *Black Sun*.

Keywords

writing, melancholia, depression, Julia Kristeva, black sun, the maternal Thing,
matricide, signifying practice, sublime, sublimation, *Aufhebung*, gender

For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia.

—Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*

From Ancient Greece to the present time, the concept of melancholia, a “dis-ease” of disconcerting silence, has crossed the boundaries between medical, literary, and cultural analysis. In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva examines the link between depression and the history of melancholia in a literary, artistic, and psychoanalytic context. Her *Black Sun* is not only a rethinking of the Freudian formulation of mourning and melancholia but also a reconceptualization of the disease as a linguistic malady whose primary symptom is chronic asymbolia or loss of speech and meaning. Thus melancholia, like the semiotic and the abject in her former works, is her main conceptual “term” in *Black Sun*.

Kristeva’s work on melancholia can be looked upon as an integral part of her project to bring the unspeakable into desire and language. In melancholia, there is a disinvestment in language’s symbolic power, a split between language and affect. The melancholic communicates the dynamics of emotion or affect at the infra-verbal or semiotic level of tone, modulation, and vocal gesture. There is a failure of symbolic activity, a state of abjection, or a state Kristeva also refers to as asymbolia. And yet this melancholy state of asymbolia is not a state of static silence. Rather, it is a state of vibrant dynamics, fluctuating between melancholy confusion with the semiotic mother and therapeutic identification with the symbolic father. Kristeva conjures up the unsettling image of the “black sun” (“*soleil noir*”) from Gérard de Nerval’s sonnet, “El Desdichado” (1853) to manifest the melancholy state which is at once dark and radiant.¹ The dynamic tensions between darkness and radiance as well as between melancholia and writing embody Kristeva’s “dis-eased” interpretation of melancholia.

On the dark side, melancholia results from a denial of the separation from the mother—a denial of the “matricide” which, says Kristeva, is our vital necessity. Im-

¹ The importance of Kristeva’s reading of Nerval’s “El Desdichado” cannot be emphasized enough because, as Juliana Schiesari notes, it “is underscored by her taking the title of her book from the final words of the poem’s first quatrain: ‘the black sun of melancholy’ [*le soleil noir de la mélancholie*]” (86). In *Black Sun*, Kristeva’s question—“Where does the black sun come from” (3)—inquires about the origins of melancholia and ushers in the image of “black sun” as the prototype of the dynamic encounters where darkness and brightness crisscross and transform into one another, where feelings and meanings coalesce in paradoxical profundity, where subdued melancholia and glaring words join to form poetic language, where matricide and suicide struggle to end the unbearable “lightness” of black bile.

mobilized in the condition of suffering without being able to speak it, the melancholic only encounters what Kristeva calls the melancholic Thing. On the radiant side, Kristeva, in *Black Sun*, commits herself to opening up and verbalizing the hermetic layer of melancholia. She is most concerned with the problem of representing the unspeakable of melancholia in art and literature. Art and literature, founded on a melancholia overcome, constitute a form of symbolic sublimation—that is, a sublimation of the subject in the symbolic which takes the place of the lost maternal object.

Swinging between two extremes, what exactly is the state of melancholia in Kristeva's *Black Sun*? In what way is it dynamic? How does the melancholic emerge from asymbolia, achieving signification and representation? How does he/she cross boundaries and make links with art, literature, and culture? What is the maternal Thing? Can the maternal Thing of melancholia lead to any significant transformation of cultural paradigms? Does it empower the female melancholic or make her sink deeper into a mute darkness? One of the main concerns of this paper is to explore the dynamic encounter between writing and melancholia in Kristeva's *Black Sun*, with its operations of negation, its matricide and its sublimation. This paper also will attempt to sketch out the dynamic role of melancholia in the production of art and literature. Kristeva opposes the "artistic" or "writing cure" to melancholia, yet this opposition constitutes at once the most dynamic, therapeutic, yet also problematic aspect of Kristeva's theory. This theory runs the risk of a dangerous circularity, returning women to a patriarchal symbolic order that contributed to the production of female melancholia in the first place. Therefore this paper, "Writing the Melancholic," is a critique which aims to sharpen our awareness of the hidden assumptions or conceptual limits embedded in Kristeva's conceptualization of melancholia, a gender study which hopes to make clear a certain gender bias that structures Kristeva's *Black Sun*. In *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*, Kelly Oliver attempts to avoid the critical extremes ranging "from ultraanarchistic to ultraconservative," and instead "offer a sympathetic, recuperative reading of Kristeva in order to use her theories in a feminist context" while remaining "critical of those theories" (2). In this paper, I will shun the critical extremes mentioned by Oliver. My analysis, however, is essentially a meta-criticism. Other than examining Kristeva's theories from a feminist perspective, I have no intention "to use her theories in a feminist context."

I. Kristeva's Melancholia: Beyond the Terminology Confusion between Melancholia and Depression

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva makes a subtle but telling distinction between the categories of melancholia and depression. Compared with depression, which is of lesser intensity and frequency, melancholia of the institutional and chronic type is a serious affliction characterized by more frequent manic/depressive alterations.² Thus Kristeva's graver melancholia and milder depression recall the orthodox psychoanalytic distinction between psychosis and neurosis.³ However, in her book *Kristeva*, after pointing out the common ground shared by the two—"the same *impossible mourning for the maternal object*" (*BS* 9)—is not prepared to keep this fine distinction. Here she disregards the differences between the two and argues that it is possible to speak of a "melancholy/depressive" composite.⁴ Kristeva further explains her stand: "Thus I shall speak of depression and melancholia without always distinguishing the particularities of the two ailments but keeping in mind their common structure" (*BS* 11). Her strategy is to leave thorny questions of nosology behind, incorporate what she thinks the "politically correct" position of Freud, and embark on her quest for "a noncommunicable grief" under the black sun (*BS* 3). "Without going into details about various types of depression [...]," Kristeva proclaims, "I shall examine matters from a *Freudian point of view*. On that basis, I shall try to bring out, from the core of the melancholy/depressive composite, blurred as its borders may be, what pertains to a common experience of object loss and of a *modification of signifying bonds*" (*BS* 10). Kristeva elaborates the Freudian theorization of melancholia and maintains that mourning arises primarily

² As Kristeva explains, "I shall call *melancholia* the institutional symptomatology of inhibition and asymbolia that becomes established now and then or chronically in a person, alternating more often than not with the so-called manic phase of exaltation. When the two phenomena, despondency and exhilaration, are of lesser intensity and frequency, it is then possible to speak of neurotic depression" (*BS* 9). All references to *Black Sun* are hereafter abbreviated as *BS*.

³ Stanley Jackson in his *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times* attempts to draw a distinction between different affects of bereavement in mourning, melancholia, and depression. See especially the section "Melancholia and Depression in the Twentieth Century" 188-246. In "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive Stages," Melanie Klein sees a fundamental continuity between mourning and the later appearance of various kinds of grief or depression.

⁴ Kristeva writes that "[t]he terms melancholia and depression refer to a composite that might be called melancholy/depressive, whose borders are in fact blurred, and within which psychiatrists ascribe the concept of 'melancholia' to the illness that is irreversible on its own (that responds only to the administration of antidepressants)" (*BS* 10).

from the child's loss of the symbiotic relationship with the mother (the semiotic). This symbiosis forces the mourner to retrieve the mother through the "outside" world of language and signs (the symbolic). As Kristeva notes, "Upon losing mother and relying on negation, I retrieve her as sign, image, word" (*BS* 63). Without this retrieval to represent the mother in language, Kristeva argues, mourning may evolve into melancholia, no longer yearning for the Freudian object of desire but the maternal "Thing," a non-object of desire and loss that escapes signification. Melancholia, thus, is an uncompleted mourning for the pre-objectal mother—the maternal Thing. Unnamable and unrepresentable, the maternal Thing, associated with the pre-oedipal or pre-discursive libidinal economy, is a feminine point of resistance to entering the symbolic and a "pathological state" as compared to the phallogocentric models of well-being.

Like the *chora*, the maternal Thing designates a mobile, unspeakable, pre-symbolic site. Kristeva describes "the 'Thing' as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated" (*BS* 13). Here Kristeva draws on the Lacanian notion of "the real."⁵ Like the real that is ineffable, impossible to describe, the maternal Thing is a melancholy state manifesting a painful narcissism that escapes signification. The un-representable "Thing" is best described in terms of the oxymoronic Nervalian metaphor of the "black sun," which refers to an intense affect escaping conscious articulation: "Of this Nerval provides a dazzling metaphor that suggests an insistence without presence, a light without representation: the Thing is an imagined sun, bright and black at the same time" (*BS* 13). Resisting language and meaning, the Thing is the locus of melancholia, the consequence of an impossible love in "the crypt of [...] inexpressible affect" (*BS* 53). The maternal Thing is the feminized other which imprisons and isolates the melancholic in the labyrinth of strangeness, otherness, and affectivity: "My pain is the hidden side of my philosophy, its mute sister" (*BS* 4).

For Kristeva, the problem of melancholia comes down to the problem of "to kill or not to kill": that is, to be a mother-killer or to be a melancholic, to choose either matricide or suicide. Matricide is the first step toward autonomy and the promise of

⁵ "The real" is one of the realms according to which all Lacanian psychoanalytic phenomena may be described, the other two being the symbolic and the imaginary. The real, in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I*, emerges as that which is outside of language and representation. It is "that which resists symbolization absolutely" (66). In *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II*, the real is "the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence" (164).

cure; one must “kill” the mother to become an independent and psychologically healthy subject. Only by the act of matricide can the maternal Thing be lost and found again, “transposed,” as Kristeva puts it, “by means of an unbelievable symbolic effort” (BS 28). Addressing the topic of the “Death-Bearing Woman,” Kristeva claims that

the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the *sine qua non* condition of our individuation, provided that it takes place under optimal circumstances and can be eroticized—whether the lost object is [...] transposed by means of an unbelievable symbolic effort [...] which eroticizes the *other* [...] or transforms cultural constructs into a ‘sublime’ erotic object (one thinks of the cathexes, by men and women in social bonds, intellectual and aesthetic productions, etc.). (BS 27-28)

To kill the mother, or matricide, is “a vital necessity” for the psychic health of both men and women; not to kill the mother implies an inadequate integration into the symbolic, evidenced by such melancholic symptoms as asymbolia and even the death drive to commit suicide: “the maternal object having been introjected, the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows, instead of matricide” (BS 28). Melancholics have internalized the maternal object. Unwilling to negate their loss of the mother, they suspend the mechanism of negation. As Kristeva writes,

Signs are arbitrary because language starts with a *negation* (*Verneinung*) of loss, along with the depression occasioned by mourning. [...] Depressed persons [...] *disavow the negation*: they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose, to which they remain painfully riveted. (BS 43-44)

Why should this negation of the loss of the mother take the psychically violent form of what Kristeva calls a matricide? Kristeva sees matricide as the only viable alternative to the sway of the death drive.⁶ However, it seems to me that her belief in

⁶ “The lesser or greater violence of matricidal drive, depending on individuals and the milieu’s tolerance, entails, when it is hindered, its inversion on the self; the maternal object having been introjected, the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows, instead of matricide. In order to protect mother, I kill myself while knowing—phantasmatic and protective knowledge—that it comes from her, the death-bearing she-Gehenna” (BS 28).

the beneficial qualities and the inevitability of matricide are deeply problematic. Her theory of matricide is built on the deep-rooted misogyny of the Freudian Oedipal drama. It makes “death” and “mother” two primal images of melancholia and the “death-bearing mother” the grim image of a curse on woman, namely, death as woman and woman as death. As David R. Crownfield remarks: “Death, the unrepresentable, the ultimate absence, is symbolized as woman; woman becomes, through metonymy, death” (21). As a regression to an archaic state, or from matricide to suicide, Kristeva notes that this phenomenon is akin to what Freud called the death drive. Drawing on Freud, she says that the death drive appears as a “biological and logical inability to transmit psychic energies and inscriptions,” therefore destroying “movements and bonds” (BS 17). Besides the ideology of misogyny and matriphobia, implied in the notion of matricide is a gendered interpretation of melancholia which is disturbingly in complicity with the symbolic order that privileges the artistic expression of male melancholia and devalues the asymbolic silence of female melancholia. Why a woman should be less capable of matricide than a man and thus more victimized by the “death-bearing mother” is another question which arises with Kristeva’s gendered interpretation. Kristeva never specifically answers this question, but her stance is clear: that is, women’s incapability to commit matricide makes them sink deeper into the muddled state of the maternal Thing, and the mother is turned from a lost “object” to the “pre-objectal Thing.”

Because of the association of melancholia with the mother and the maternal Thing, Kristeva runs the risk of feminizing melancholia and thereby reinforces the patriarchal basis of cultural production. The melancholic requires the maternal Thing, the thought of alterity, as the imprint of the other within the same. For Kristeva, the maternal Thing is not only a site of resistance but also a basis for recuperation. It can “be conveyed through and beyond a completed mourning” (BS 66). Thereby, the pain of loss is replaced by the joy of mastering signs (BS 67). The attempt to convey the un-conveyable is what Kristeva describes as an attempt to overcome mourning for the lost maternal Thing. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, in their *From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the “Good Enough” Mother*, call this path unto conveyability “the trajectory of melancholia”: “the male artist can follow with brilliant perceptiveness the trajectory of melancholia and, finally, both give it expression and master it” (75). However, this trajectory is a gendered one which privileges the male melancholic but marginalizes the female melancholic.

II. The Impossibility of Matricide—for the Female Melancholic

In *Black Sun*, we sense everywhere the impossibility of matricide for the female melancholic because her *denial* (*Verleugnung*) of *negation* becomes “the exercise of an impossible mourning”—the building up of a fundamental melancholia and the maternal Thing not accessible to any signifier (*BS* 44). This denial makes matricide impossible because it rejects the signifiers as well as the symbolic representatives of drives and affects. In other words, women find it enormously difficult to murder the mother because they, by identifying with the mother, have encrypted the mother within themselves.⁷ Caught between intimacy and alienation, the female melancholic, in attempting to carry out an impossible matricide, is doomed to destroy a crucial part of her own subjectivity. For the female melancholic, matricide is a form of suicide because she carries the mother or the maternal Thing with her, in the crypt of her psyche.⁸ Also, within our heterosexual society, a female melancholic cannot have a mother-substitute as an object of desire in the way that a male melancholic can. In other words, female sexuality is melancholy because it is fundamentally homosexual and must be kept a secret within a heterosexual society. Mary Jacobus elaborates this dilemma in detail in *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art, and Psychoanalysis*:

The extra symbolic effort demanded of women becomes for Kristeva the defining asymmetry between the sexes. While heterosexual men and homosexual women can recover the lost maternal object as erotic object, finding an erotic object other than the primary maternal object (i.e., a heterosexual object) involves for *heterosexual women* “a gigantic elaboration”—far greater than men are called upon to undertake in the interests of their own heterosexuality. (52)

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva reads not only clinical cases of female depression but also works by four melancholy artists—Hans Holbein, Gérard de Nerval, Fyodor Do-

⁷ Kristeva also maintains a similar view in *Tales of Love*: “the dramas of individuation demand of her such a violent rejection of the mother, and by the mother, that in the hatred of the loved object a woman immediately finds herself in a known and intolerable country” (373).

⁸ “[...] since I am She (sexually and narcissistically), She is I? Consequently, the hatred I bear her is not oriented toward the outside but is locked up within myself” (*BS* 29).

stoyevsky, and Marguerite Duras. In the chapter entitled “Illustrations of Feminine Depression,” Kristeva recounts the psychoanalysis of three depressed women, whereas in each of the other four chapters she focuses on a melancholy artist. Her three illustrations of feminine depression show the patients’ attachment to the mother or what Kristeva calls “the maternal Thing.” According to Kristeva, female depression is more common than male depression and in some respects more difficult to treat because a woman’s attachment to her mother is often insurmountable. On the other hand, her analyses of the four artists showcase her concern about “the imaginative capability of Western man,” which is the ability “to transfer meaning to the very place where it was lost in death and/or nonmeaning” (*BS* 103), to endow “the lost signifier with a signifying pleasure,” and to assert “the subjective experience of a named melancholia—of melancholy jouissance” (*BS* 102).

Hans Holbein is the first melancholy artist that Kristeva deals with in *Black Sun*. In the chapter “Holbein’s Dead Christ,” Holbein’s work, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521), is used to illustrate the fact that a work of art is founded on a suffering overcome, a melancholia which constitutes a symbolic resurrection: that is, a resurrection of the subject in the symbolic. Then in the next chapter, “Gérard de Nerval, the Disinherited Poet,” Kristeva reads Nerval’s sonnet “El Desdichado” as the disinherited melancholic’s attempt to reach the realm of signs, to give a name to the Thing that he mourns. The task of Nerval, the melancholic poet, is to find a poetic language that comes close to the Thing and then to sublimate this traumatic experience into “an independent symbolic object—a sonnet” (*BS* 162).⁹ Like Holbein’s painting, Nerval’s sonnet captures the critical moment of melancholia with great intensity and in great detail. In his sonnet Nerval, using a double-bind strategy, flirts dangerously with the Thing and repels the dark asymbolia by setting up an “I” who writes. Kristeva’s key point here is that in order not to be captivated by asymbolia, melancholia must be feminized or maternalized and expressed in or through a “prosodic polymorphism”—rhythms, melodies, alliterations—instead of via univocal “information.”¹⁰ For

⁹ Kristeva makes the point clear in an earlier paragraph:

By means of a leap into the orphic world of artifice (of sublimation), the saturnine poet, out of the traumatic experience and object of mourning, remembers only a gloomy or passionate tone. He thus comes close, through the very components of language, to the lost Thing. His discourse identifies with it, absorbs it, modifies it, transforms it: he takes Eurydice out of the melancholy hell and gives her back a new existence in his text/song. (*BS* 160)

¹⁰ As Kristeva explains, “Nerval appears to favor the network of intensities, sounds, significances rather than communicating univocal information” (*BS* 170).

Kristeva, Nerval's madness is tamed through the sublimation of his art, specifically the form and technique of his polymorphic style which allows Nerval to stay in touch with the Thing, resist the maternal seduction, and not conform to the univocal meaning of the paternal Symbolic. In Chapter 7, "Dostoyevsky, the Writing of Suffering, and Forgiveness," Dostoyevsky's work is exalted by Kristeva for successfully sublimating the melancholy, morbid identification with the mother into writing, the embodiment of aesthetic and immoral forgiveness. That is, Dostoyevsky is able to verbalize the affect of suffering in a new style. For Kristeva, Dostoyevsky's writing achieves a rejuvenating transformation and best exemplifies how the "unconscious might inscribe itself in a new narrative that will not be the eternal return of the death drive" (*BS* 204).

In the last Chapter, "The Malady of Grief: Duras," Kristeva proceeds with her analysis of the melancholy artist. This chapter is special because it is Kristeva's first extended analysis of the work of a woman writer—Marguerite Duras. In contrast to the former three "male" artists—Holbein, Nerval, and Dostoyevsky, whose works are highly praised, Duras, the only "female" artist discussed in *Black Sun*, is treated with reservation and finally dismissed as a case of failure not unlike that of the depressed women analyzed earlier in the book. For Kristeva, Duras's "discourse of dulled pain" captures the "malady of death" in "an aesthetics of awkwardness" and "a *noncathartic literature*," a style clearly less musical than that produced by Duras's male counterparts (*BS* 225).¹¹ Kristeva's comments on Duras are obviously tainted by her prejudice against depressed women and female melancholy artists. While the male artists are discussed, Doane and Hodges write, "in a tone of reverence, if not awe,"—"Holbein's minimalist style is 'dignified' (119), 'sober' (138); Nerval is 'brilliantly' perceptive (169); Dostoyevsky discovers the beauty and 'solemnity of forgiveness' (189)"—Duras's aesthetic practice is received "with barely concealed contempt" (74).¹² For Kristeva, Duras's works bring the readers to the verge of madness, offering only a dismal and bleak psychic landscape, with no catharsis in sight. As Kristeva writes, "There is no purification in store for us at the conclusion of those novels written on the brink of illness, no improvement, no promise of a beyond, not even the enchanting beauty of style or irony that might provide a bonus of pleasure in addition to the

¹¹ As Kristeva blatantly states, "Duras' writing does not analyze itself by seeking its sources in the music that lies under the words nor in the defeat of the narrative's logic. If there be a formal search, it is subordinate to confrontation with the silence of horror in oneself and in the world. Such a confrontation leads her to an aesthetics of *awkwardness* on the one hand, to a *noncathartic literature* on the other" (*BS* 225).

¹² I am deeply indebted to the perceptive observations, and sharp criticisms, of Kristeva offered by Doane and Hodges.

revealed evil" (*BS* 227-28). For Kristeva, Duras is the exemplary female artist trapped in the primordial realm of the Thing. Thus, her writing demonstrates her inability to rise above this inner desolation and sublimate the terrible "passion for death" (*BS* 221) through a decent style.¹³

At the end of the chapter, Kristeva launches another wave of critique at Duras: "Duras does not orchestrate it [the malady of suffering] in the fashion of Mallarmé who sought for the music in words, nor in the manner of Beckett who refines a syntax that marks time or moves ahead by fits and starts, warding off the narrative's flight forward" (*BS* 258). For her, Duras is totally incompetent to make any ultimate expression of suffering and her characters' elliptical speeches "point to a disaster of words in the face of the unnamable affect" (*BS* 258). Other than silence and nothingness, what is left in Duras's work is "a blankness of meaning" and "a world of unsettling, infectious ill-being," "coupled with rhetorical awkwardness" (*BS* 258). What's more, Duras belongs to the "tragic" modern world which is full of "the abyssal discontent," unable to confront "the postmodern challenge" which is "closer to the human comedy" (*BS* 258-59). As Doane and Hodges rightfully claim, "in Kristeva's scheme, women are associated with sadness and the abyss rather than with the comic" (76).

Kristeva hardly mentions another female melancholy artist in *Black Sun*. When discussing Duras, she either adopts a disparaging attitude or devalues her works and style in a blatantly disrespectful manner. Clearly, Kristeva is gender-biased when addressing "melancholia." Defined as pathological and problematic, the female melancholy artist, not to say the depressed women, can never serve as an agent who has the power to sublimate the mother or the maternal Thing because what female melancholia signifies is exactly the failure of the female melancholic's ability to translate or metaphorize. On the contrary, male artists are the privileged agents, those able to translate the pre-discursive and feminized melancholy Thing into a new discourse or a work of art. For them "melancholia," as Kristeva asserts, "becomes the secret mainspring of a new rhetoric" (*BS* 224). Given Kristeva's prejudiced, gendered interpretation of female melancholia, the female melancholic can only be relegated to an "impossible" maternal corner, incapable of any aesthetic sublimation. Thus Schiesari remarks that "when melancholia is considered undesirable it is stereotypically metaphorized as feminine or

¹³ Doane and Hodges argue that "Kristeva's analysis of Duras, then, simply serves to exemplify what she has to say about feminine sexuality and 'illness' [...]. Kristeva's conclusion again attempts to make of Duras a representative of her age, but the message is finally that she is an exemplary instance of the sick female" (75).

viewed as an affliction women bring on men; when melancholia is valued as a creative condition, however, its privilege is grounded on an implicit or explicit exclusion of women” (18).

For Kristeva, to speak of female melancholia is to speak of something that is historically mute because the female melancholic, as exemplified by the three depressed women and Duras in *Black Sun*, remains characterized by an incapacity to translate symptoms into a language beyond its own self-referentiality and repetitiveness. While Freud argues that femininity is a high-risk condition for neurosis, given women’s difficulties in negotiating the Oedipus Complex, Kristeva suggests that women are similarly at risk for melancholia given their primary maternal identification.

III. The Trajectory of Melancholia—for the Male Melancholic

The trajectory of melancholia marks the course from a depressive state of *dénégation*—the denial (*Verleugnung*) of negation (*BS* 44)—to a manic state of reinscription of the symbolic as such. During this rite of passage, the melancholy loss, the attachment to the maternal Thing, or the death drive is resolved through the re-attachment to an object that the melancholic recovers in language. By employing Freud’s theory in “The Ego and the Id,” Kristeva argues that the melancholic might be able to reconcile the loss of the Thing through “primary identification” with the “father in individual prehistory” (*BS* 13). As she argues,

The “primary identification” with the “father in individual prehistory” would be the means, the link that might enable one to become reconciled with the loss of the Thing. Primary identification initiates a compensation for the Thing and at the same time secures the subject to another dimension, that of imaginary adherence, reminding one of the bond of faith, which is just what disintegrates in the depressed person. (*BS* 13-14)¹⁴

¹⁴ John Letche in his article, “Art, Love, and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva,” gives us a very helpful elaboration of Kristeva’s use of what she calls “the Imaginary Father”:

The father in individual prehistory emerges prior to the formation of an object which will accompany the emergence of the subject in language; it is thus prior to any ideal, but is nonetheless the *basis* of all idealization—especially in love. The father of individual prehistory which Kristeva also calls the Imaginary Father is the basis for the formation of

Again this trajectory is essentially “phallic or symbolic” and its purpose is to insure “the subject’s entrance into the universe of signs and creation” (BS 23).¹⁵

The male writer’s expression of melancholia serves “as a *discursive and cultural practice* that has given men a cultural privilege in displaying and representing loss so as to convert it into a sign of privileged subjectivity” (Schiesari 68). The male writer has a “masochistic” desire for melancholia because melancholia will eventually bring him jouissance. Matricide is easier for the male melancholic because he can eroticize his loss heterosexually by taking a mother substitute as love object. The male melancholic is a privileged figure who mediates between the domains of semiotic and symbolic, drawing on the multiple ranges of subject positions (the mother, the analytic, the patient, the narcissistic...) to articulate the multiple reflections cast by the theory of melancholia.

The suffering of the melancholy artist is always a gendered one, first feminized and then recuperated in the name of the father. This melancholy suffering eventually gives to the male melancholy artist a privileged position within literary, philosophical and artistic canons. Male melancholia is made to represent a sensitive or exquisite illness characterized by representation, especially through writing itself. The representation or trajectory of melancholia traces a line of flight from asymbolia to writing “through the moment of the negation of the affect”:

At the boundaries of emotion and action, writing comes into being only through the moment of the negation of the affect so that the effectiveness of signs might be born. Writing causes the *affect* to slip into the *effect*—*actus purus*, as Aquinas might say. It conveys affects and does not repress them, it suggests for them a sublimatory outcome, it transposes them for an other in a threefold, imaginary, and symbolic bond. Because it is for-

a successful narcissistic structure—one that enables the symbolization of loss, and the formation of desire. (30)

¹⁵ “What makes such a triumph over sadness possible is the ability of the self to identify no longer with the lost object but with a third party—father, form, schema. A requirement for a denying or manic position [...], such an identification, which may be called phallic or symbolic, insures the subject’s entrance into the universe of signs and creation. The supporting father of such a symbolic triumph is not the oedipal father but truly that ‘imaginary father,’ ‘father in individual prehistory’ according to Freud, who guarantees primary identification. Nevertheless, it is imperative that this father in individual prehistory be capable of playing his part as oedipal father in symbolic Law, for it is on the basis of that harmonious blending of the two facets of fatherhood that the abstract and arbitrary signs of communication may be fortunate enough to be tied to the affective meaning of prehistorical identifications, and the dead language of the potentially depressive person can arrive at a live meaning in the bond with others” (BS 23-24).

givenness, writing is transformation, transposition, translation. (*BS* 217)

Substituting the maternal Thing for melancholy language, the Kristevan “cure by writing” demands the transformation, transposition, and translation of the mother into words.¹⁶ As Kristeva argues, “‘I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother,’ is what the speaking subject seems to be saying. ‘But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language’” (*BS* 43). In contrast to the depressed person’s nostalgic and narcissistic clinging to the non-objectal maternal Thing, the melancholy writer negates the mother in order to recuperate or recover her in language. Thus, the melancholy language becomes the very “thing” that preserves the “Thingness” of the mother. As Kristeva writes, “The excess of affect has thus no other means of coming to the fore than to produce new languages—strange concatenations, idiolects, poetics” (*BS* 42).

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva proposes that the “artist consumed by melancholia,” fighting to overcome the death-bearing mother, mounts a relentless campaign against the “symbolic abdication” blanketing him/her (*BS* 9). She points in particular to “poetic form”—melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the decomposing and re-composing of signs—as a possible “‘container’ [...] able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing” (*BS* 14). Insofar as literary creation “bears witness to the affect,” through the transposition of “affect into rhythms, signs, forms” (*BS* 22), it may help control sadness. To write, to name suffering, exalt it, dissect it “into its smallest components—that is doubtless a way to curb mourning” (*BS* 97). Indeed, Kristeva recognizes the inevitable connection between melancholia and writing. She writes at the very beginning of *Black Sun* in a tone similar to that of Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: “For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia” (*BS* 3). Like Robert Burton, who “write[s] of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy” (I: 20), Kristeva engages in melancholy writing by busily securing meaning derived from that very melancholia. For her, melancholia takes the form of a dynamic energy-trace-libidinal flow that is unable to be stabilized itself. Her desire to write about melancholia in *Black Sun* is a melancholy desire to grasp Nerval’s “light without

¹⁶ Just like the act of translation, “it seeks to become alien to itself in order to discover, in the mother tongue, a ‘total word, new, foreign to the language’ (Mallarmé), for the purpose of capturing the unnamable” (*BS* 42).

representation: [...] an imagined sun, bright and black at the same time” (BS 13). This melancholy desire to write is not the desire to represent but the desire to be writing, writing this very desire. The melancholy desire which desires writing brings the melancholy “I” to the limit, the limit beyond which the melancholy “I” exists as a signifying process and writing as witness of melancholia. Like Freud, Kristeva sees writing as melancholia’s ultimate prevention and cure because she believes that melancholia may eventually be overcome and put into signs. Writing is the dynamic mechanism of the healing and creative process. It not only bears witness to the melancholy state but also marks the beginning of the signifying practice. It is this therapeutic effect that interests Kristeva most.¹⁷ For her, aesthetic and particularly literary creations set forth a therapeutic device “whose prosodic economy, interaction of characters, and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject’s battle with symbolic collapse” (BS 24). In order to theorize melancholia, Kristeva makes *Black Sun* a homeopathic antidote for melancholia. Thus, Kristeva’s writing is at once her symptom and her cure. The irreducible paradox of self-reference inherent in writing about melancholia appears precisely at the point where writing attempts to situate itself at the edge of a melancholy vision of the world, where writing about melancholia would constitute some essential break from the narcissistic depths of subjective contemplation so characteristic of the melancholy view of things, and could thereby constitute the meaning of the abyssal meaninglessness that the melancholic experiences.

The Kristevan melancholia, born out of either an impossible mourning for the mother or the denial of the necessity of matricide, is defined mainly as a language pathology—at once a language “dis-ease” and a disease of language.¹⁸ Kristeva emphasizes the asymbolic quality of melancholia, especially focusing on its inarticulateness, repetitiveness and monotony.¹⁹ The symptom of asymbolia is essentially an inability to translate or metaphorize as well as a failure to use language to

¹⁷ For Kristeva’s discussion of the link between the semiotic, art and poetry, see her *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*.

¹⁸ Kristeva explicitly suggests that melancholia is at once a language “dis-ease” and a disease of language: “The spectacular collapse of meaning with depressive persons—and, at the limit, the meaning of life—allows us to assume that they experience difficulty integrating the universal signifying sequence, that is, language” (BS 53).

¹⁹ “Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies” (BS 33).

give meaning to the lost maternal object.²⁰ While conceptualizing melancholia as a pathology of language, Kristeva is anxious to draw out a trajectory which privileges “the work of art as fetish” (BS 9), as counter-depressant.²¹ Leaving those inarticulate sick women behind, Kristeva valorizes artistic fetishism over melancholic hystericism,²² narcissism,²³ and “suicidal masochism.”²⁴ The trajectory of melancholia is eventually the call for signs and words. As Kristeva expresses it in *Julia Kristeva Interviews*:

I attempt to address the following problem: if the depressed person rejects language and finds it to be meaningless or false, how can we gain access to his pain *through speech*, since psychoanalysts work with speech? That is why I have emphasized the importance of the voice and of other signs that are not linguistic even though they are communicated through language. Indeed, such signs may offer the surest route toward understanding the depressed person. I also believe it is important to show how much the depressed person, who experiences a pain that often remains silent, is secretly emotional and cunningly impassioned. In brief, one could describe melancholia as an unnamable and empty perversion. Our job is to raise it to the level of words—and of life. (80)

The call to the symbolic demands that the melancholic refuse to take comfort in narcissistic regression to maternal origins or in clinging to a singular identity. In contrast to

²⁰ “Melancholia then ends up in asymbolia, in loss of meaning: if I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent and I die” (BS 42).

²¹ As Kristeva writes, “if loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it, it is also noteworthy that the work of art as fetish emerges when the activating sorrow has been repudiated. The artist consumed by melancholia is at the same time the most relentless in his struggle against the symbolic abdication that blankets him” (BS 9).

²² For Kristeva, “Fetishism appears as a solution to depression and its denial of the signifier” (BS 45). Furthermore, as Schiesari notes, “To the melancholic’s successful fetishism corresponds what Kristeva names as the depressive’s hystericism. This hystericism is a suffering due to an unfelt or ‘senseless’ affect, the defining symptom being the somatic one of inarticulate speech” (85).

²³ While both mourning and melancholia result from psychic strategies in the response to the deprivation of a maternal object, the melancholic turns angry at themselves. This self-reflexivity implies that melancholia is puzzlingly narcissistic.

²⁴ Kristeva mentions Freud’s theory of “primary masochism” when she discusses the death drive in narcissistic melancholia: “Freud’s postulate of a *primary masochism* is consonant with aspects of narcissistic melancholia in which the dying out of all libidinal bonds appears not to be a simple matter of turning aggressiveness toward the object back into animosity against the self but is asserted as previous to any possibility of object questioning” (BS 16).

the state of asymbolia, a state of muteness and slowness, the dynamic state of de-asymbolia, of the ecstasy of language, is

an accelerated, creative cognitive process—witness the studies bearing on the very singular and inventive associations made by depressed persons starting from word lists submitted to them. Such hyperactivity with signifiers reveals itself particularly by connecting distant semantic fields and recalls the puns of hypomanics. (*BS* 59)²⁵

What exactly is the nature of this trajectory, this recuperation from the depressive state to the hyper-manic state, from asymbolia to de-asymbolia (aesthetic creation) or from narcissistic masochism to artistic fetishism? In *Black Sun*, artistic or fetishistic melancholia is deemed a victory of the father, its depressive or clinical (hysterical) counterpart a submission to the mother. In reaction to the mother and in complicity with the father, the trajectory of melancholia is a gendered dialectic in the sense that melancholia as feminized asymbolia or loss of words and meanings, and melancholy writing as the recovery of words and meanings are two dynamic, dialectical events that occur under melancholia. As Schiesari points out, “melancholia occurs, on the one hand, as a clinical/medical condition and, on the other hand, *as a discursive practice* through which an individual subject who is classified as melancholic or who classifies himself as melancholic is legitimated in the representation of *his* artistic trajectory” (15). In *Black Sun*, melancholia is always a matter of writing. The dynamic encounter between melancholia and writing constitutes at once the most therapeutic and yet the most problematic aspect of Kristeva’s gendered conceptualization—the negation of the mother or the maternal Thing in order to tell a tale of Beauty.²⁶ This tale of Beauty or “revolution in poetic language” is the prerogative of the male artist, not the woman writer, as exemplified in Duras’s case.

Writing melancholy writing, the more agonizingly the melancholic weaver-writer

²⁵ In the article “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident” in *The Kristeva Reader*, Kristeva emphasizes that the exuberance of language is the real cutting edge of dissidence: “But through the efforts of thought in language, or precisely through the excesses of the languages whose very multitude is the only sign of life, one can attempt to bring about multiple sublations of the unnamable, the unrepresentable, the void” (300).

²⁶ In *Black Sun*, Kristeva offers us a tale of “Beauty”—“the Depressive’s Other Realm” (*BS* 95)—whose purpose is not only to appease the avenging furies of the mother but also to remove the matricidal guilt. For Kristeva, by means of “prosody,” then “the polyvalence of sign and symbol,” and finally “the psychic organization of forgiveness,” the melancholic is “capable of removing the guilt from revenge, or humiliation from narcissistic wound” (*BS* 97).

spins words, the more entwined they seem to be. Yet, regardless of this apparent entanglement, interminable words get woven and melancholia is “manically” articulated. Writing, given its own interminability, turns out to be a homeopathic medicine well-suited to the disease from which it springs.²⁷ This homeopathic writing is embodied in the Nervalian “I” who writes the line “I am saturnine—bereft—disconsolate.” As Kristeva elaborates, “This ‘I’ that pins down and secures the first line, ‘I am saturnine—bereft—disconsolate,’ points [...] to the necessary condition for the poetic act. To speak, to venture, to settle within the legal function known as symbolic activity, that is indeed to lose the Thing” (*BS* 145-46). The fluctuation or the swing between “I” and “the Thing” or between “writing” and “asymbolia” will be permanent, without end, weaving an infinite symbolic/semiotic web. If “writing is impossible without some kind of exile,” as Kristeva expressed it in the article “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident” (*Reader* 298), writing is also impossible without some kind of melancholia.

IV. Melancholia—the “Dis-eased” Signifying Practice: Unto the Melancholy Sublime and the Kristevan *Aufhebung*

At the beginning of *Black Sun*, Kristeva declares her intention to address “an abyss of sorrow” or “a noncommunicable grief” (3). This intention reveals her preoccupation with the act of analysis and the practice of signification: to make known or manifest the mute, the silent, and the unknown. Her formulations of the semiotic, the abject, and melancholia are the conceptual markers of her preoccupation.²⁸ In her investigations in *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Desire in Language*, Kristeva analyzes what traditional linguistics excludes—the crisis or at least unsettling process of meaning within the signifying phenomena.²⁹ To carry out the analysis of signifying

²⁷ “If the melancholy person ceaselessly exerts an ascendancy, as loving as it is hateful, over that Thing, the poet finds an enigmatic way of being both subordinate to it and [...] elsewhere. Disinherited, deprived of that lost paradise, he is wretched; writing, however, is the strange way that allows him to overcome such wretchedness by setting up an ‘I’ that controls both aspects of deprivation—the darkness of disconsolation and the ‘kiss of the queen’” (*BS* 145).

²⁸ As Anne-Marie Smith observes, “Representing and giving meaning to the primarily unsayable is at the heart of Kristeva’s project” (45).

²⁹ “I shall call signifying practice the establishment and countervailing of a sign system. Establishing a sign system calls for the identity of a speaking subject within a social framework, which he recognizes as a basis for that identity. Countervailing the sign system is done by having the subject undergo an

phenomena, Kristeva proposes to turn from the theory of language as a universal sign system to language as a “signifying process” in order to underscore both systematicity and transgression in every signifying practice.³⁰ In the same manner, Kristeva’s understanding of melancholia in *Black Sun* has hinted at a different understanding of mental illness, which now is no longer conceptualized or pathologized in terms of general medical terms but in terms of the specificity and multiplicity of signifying practices. Kristeva argues that one cannot refuse matricide without becoming melancholic. Yet asymbolia and the maternal Thing can be the abject states which unsettle the symbolic’s limits. To Kristeva, the melancholy subject is a subject-in-process and on trial.³¹ Aesthetic creation offers a way for the melancholic to proceed, to try to turn his or her depression into a work of art in the paternal community of the symbolic.

In *Black Sun*, the signifying practice of melancholia signals a certain type of “ethical turn.” In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva argues that ethics is “the negativizing of narcissism within a *practice*” (233). “Julia Kristeva’s rethinking of ethics as a signifying practice rather than a foundational basis for morality,” as Crownfield suggests, “makes a substantial contribution to the development of a postmodern ethics” (92). Kristeva recognizes the need for ethics as a signifying practice to respond to the narcissistic contradictions within the melancholic. Thus, the signifying practice of melancholia posits not a “moral” sense whose purpose is to define melancholia medically or clinically but an ethics of aesthetic creation—the “Hegelian aesthetic.” As Kristeva elaborates in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, “The subject of the Hegelian aesthetic—the free subject par excellence—reveals the diremption [*épuisement*] of the ethical subject and effects its *Aufhebung* in order to reintroduce him into a process of transformation of community relations and discursive strata” (110). In *Black Sun*, this newly initiated process of transformation helps shape “sublimation’s dynamics” (99)

unsettling, questionable process; this indirectly challenges the social framework with which he had previously identified, and it thus coincides with times of abrupt changes, renewal, or revolution in society” (*Desire* 18). “I [...] argue in favor of an analytical theory of signifying systems and practices that would search within signifying phenomena for the *crisis* of the *unsettling process* of meaning and subject rather than for the coherence or identity or either *one* or a *multiplicity* of structures” (*Desire* 125).

³⁰ “The notion of *practice* [...] would be applied to texts in which heterogeneous contradiction is maintained as an indispensable precondition for the dimensions of practice through a signifying formation [...]. The fundamental moment of practice is the heterogeneous contradiction that posits a subject put in process/on trial by a natural or social outside that is not yet symbolized, a subject in conflict with previous theses [...]. The subject of this experience-in-practice is an excess, never one, always already divided [...].” (*Revolution* 195, 203, 204).

³¹ Her theory of the melancholic that is introjected by pre-objectal otherness from within and then projected into multiple cultural objects or practices shows exactly the melancholy subject-in-process.

and eventually results in the “melancholy sublime.”³² Indeed, what is striking about Kristeva’s *Black Sun* is her idea of sublimation and the melancholy sublime. Valorizing artistic creation, Kristeva aestheticizes melancholia. In other words, the entire effort of Kristeva’s writing on melancholia is to promote the sublimatory or aesthetic value of the melancholy sublime.³³ Kristeva elaborates in *Julia Kristeva Interviews*:

As I say in my book, beauty is born in the land of melancholia; it is a source of harmony that goes beyond despair [...]. Depression is at the threshold of creativity. When depression becomes creative, however, it has given a name and has thus been overcome [...]. Depression remains a secret force, perhaps even a form of modern sacredness.” (79, 82, 84)

Kristeva’s indebtedness in *Black Sun* to Freud and the Renaissance notion of melancholia is evidenced by her attributing to melancholia an aesthetic—hence truthful—quality.³⁴ Like her predecessors, Kristeva privileges the role of melancholia in the production of art and culture in general and sees sublated melancholia as a great source of truth and beauty. She believes that art is the privileged site by which to achieve the melancholy sublime. As Doane and Hodges observe, “Kristeva is particularly interested in art as the exemplary vehicle of the Western imagination. Art enables a sublimation of the excruciating pain caused by separation from the lost

³² “Sublimation’s dynamics, by summoning up primary processes and idealization, weaves a *hyper-sign* around and with the depressive void. This is *allegory*, as lavishness of that which *no longer is*, but which regains for myself a higher meaning because I am able to remake nothingness, better than it was and within an unchanging harmony, here and now and forever, for the sake of someone else. Artifice, as sublime meaning for and on behalf of the underlying, implicit nonbeing, replaces the ephemeral. Beauty is consubstantial with it. Like feminine finery concealing stubborn depressions, beauty emerges as the admirable face of loss, transforming it in order to make it live [...]. Sublimation alone withstands death. The beautiful object that can bewitch us into its world seems to us more worthy of adoption than any loved or hated cause for wound or sorrow. Depression recognizes this and agrees to live within and for that object, but such adoption of the sublime is no longer libidinal. It is already detached, dissociated, it has already integrated the traces of death, which is signified as lack of concern, absentmindedness, carelessness. Beauty is an artifice; it is imaginary” (BS 99,100).

³³ In Chapter 4 of *Black Sun*, entitled “Beauty: The Depressive’s Other Realm,” Kristeva emphasizes the view that “art seems to point to a few devices that bypass complacency and, without simply turning mourning into mania, secure for the artist and the connoisseur a sublimatory hold over the lost Thing” (97). In a more recent work, *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995), Kristeva reiterates the same point, that psychic disturbances must be transformed through “linguistic activity into a form of sublimation or into an intellectual, interpretive, or transformational activity” (29).

³⁴ Kristeva explicitly confirms the interlinking relationship between melancholia, truth, and beauty: “A new idea was born in Europe, a paradoxical painterly idea—the idea that truth is severe, sometimes sad, often melancholy. Can such a truth also constitute beauty? Holbein’s wager, beyond melancholia, is to answer, yes it can” (BS 127).

object—or at least it enables such a sublimation by the male artist” (68). The male artist and the trajectory of melancholia coincide in the production of a new kind of art—a tale of truth, beauty, and sublimity. The melancholy artist becomes someone who struggles to negotiate with the maternal Thing and bring out the truth of the feminized other in a tale of the melancholy sublime, one whose significance relies on the dialectical *Aufhebung*—that is, the practice of dialectical loss and recovery and the dialectical process of relentless aestheticization.

Kristeva’s theorization, then, is problematic for its complicity with patriarchy, its anti-feminist position, and its privileging of the melancholy sublime. It “artfully” and “beautifully” sublimates melancholia and enthrones “the Male Melancholy Artist King,” while confining the mother and the female artist in the Thing. Her distinction between artistic male melancholia and asymbolic or hysterical female depression implies in Kristeva a certain misogyny, one which reinforces the traditional paradigms of the discourse of melancholia. Kristeva’s gendering of melancholia and the rhetoric of violence against the maternal are easily noticed in her uncritical over-estimation of the universality of signifying practice. Her appropriations of modern clinical depression and traditional heroic melancholia work to situate her theorization within her established theories concerning the role of poetic language in the signifying practice, the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic, the inarticulation of the *chora* or the Thing, and recuperative sublimation and the sublime.

In order to map out the trajectory or sublimation of melancholia from the melancholy Thing to the symbolic, Kristeva deploys the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*, which has a double meaning of “negation” and “conservation.” Yet these references to Hegel underscore not only the fact that the symbolic is produced by a dialectical operation but also that this operation fails to subsume entirely the semiotic heterogeneity: no “signifier can effect the *Aufhebung* of the semiotic without leaving the remainder” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 51).³⁵ This melancholy economy of *Aufhebung* yields a dialectic of the emotive and the cognitive and then strives to elevate this affective experience to a new state of subjectivity and a new ideal, though a precarious one. Thus, in *Black Sun*, melancholia reveals negativity as being indispensable to

³⁵ In *Black Sun*, Kristeva elaborates the working of *Aufhebung*:

Giving shape to signs [...]. The “primary” aspect of such an action clarifies why it has the ability to reach, beyond words and intellects, emotions and bruised bodies. That economy, however, is anything but primitive. The logical possibility for taking over (*Aufhebung*) that it implies (nonmeaning and meaning, positive burst integrating its potential nothingness) follows upon a sound fastening of the subject to the oblatory ideal. (207)

dialectical truth.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva refers to the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic in language as a “dialectic” (24).³⁶ While arguing that the melancholic can “fall” into the maternal Thing because the maternal Thing is within the melancholic,³⁷ Kristeva attempts to bring the maternal Thing back into language by putting the logic of language into the maternal Thing. This dialectic of fall and empowerment corresponds most clearly to the movement between loss and recovery, or meaninglessness and meaning. In *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*, Oliver calls this dialectic of Kristeva the “double-bind strategy”: “putting symbolic logic within the body, and putting semiotic bodily drives within the Symbolic” (4). Practicing this “double-bind strategy,” Kristeva’s eventual concern is still with the signifying practice and the subject-in-process. This signifying practice, breaking and redefining the limits of language, is realized through the dialectical oscillation between the semiotic and symbolic mentioned above.

Like the Hegelian dialectic the Kristevan dialectic is essentially hierarchical, because what the melancholic attempts to do is always to rise from the Thing or to “sublimate” from the fall.³⁸ And yet it deviates from the Hegelian canon because it is “ethical,”³⁹ “beautiful,”⁴⁰ and “sublime,” rather than “idealistic,” “progressive,” and “circular.”⁴¹ For Oliver, the Kristevan dialectic of/between the semiotic and the symbolic is “not a Hegelian dialectic with its continued return to the subject position” and, unlike Hegel, Kristeva “emphasizes crisis and not reconciliation” (98). In *Body/Text in*

³⁶ Elizabeth Grosz also points out that Kristeva puts the semiotic and symbolic in a dialectical relationship. As Grosz writes, “Kristeva conceives of their [the symbolic and semiotic’s] interaction as a dialectic, a confrontation between contradictory forces which enables change to occur” (*Sexual Subversions* 49).

³⁷ “[...] before being an Other, the Thing is the recipient that contains my dejecta and everything that results from *cadere* [Latin: to fall]—it is a waste with which, in my sadness, I merge [...]. For those who are depressed, the Thing like the self is a downfall that carries them along into the invisible and unnamable. *Cadere*. Waste and cadavers all” (*BS* 15).

³⁸ “To facilitate the imperious, dynamic passage of this alternating, instinctual rhythm, a *hierarchically fluctuating* social system is necessary” (*Revolution* 99).

³⁹ “The conception of the ethical function of art separates us, in a radical way, from one that would commit art to serving as the representation of a so-called progressive ideology or an avant-garde socio-historical philosophy [...]. The notion of art’s ethical function also separates us from Hegel’s idealist position, which sees art as a means of repressing or ‘purifying’ the passions as it represents them” (*Revolution* 233).

⁴⁰ “In the place of death and so as not to die of the other’s death, I bring forth—or at least I rate highly—an artifice, an ideal, a ‘beyond’ that my psyche produces in order to take up a position outside itself—*ek-stasis*. How beautiful to be able to replace all perishable psychic values” (*BS* 99).

⁴¹ “A critique of Hegelian idealism necessarily attempts to break through its circular reasoning and reach both the concrete materiality of ‘existence’ and a notion of the practice of the subject as more than mere logical abstraction (theoretical contemplation)” (*Revolution* 127).

Julia Kristeva, Crownfield also points out the difference between Hegel and Kristeva:

Kristeva's nonteleological account of 'signifying practice' develops from a Hegelian-Marxist understanding of practice in a form that deconstructs its archeteleological character: maintaining difference between origin and destiny means abandoning the dream of linking beginning and end that has haunted Western thought since Aristotle. (94)

Unlike the Hegelian linear and teleological model, the Kristevan practice operates on the principle of heterogeneity and multiplicity.

In a word, Kristeva's melancholia draws on the Hegelian dialectic and its play of negativity. Then it transforms the Hegelian model into a dynamic which, unlike its source, offers a nonteleological conclusion, no "synthesis" arresting the tensions and contradictions which mark history and revolution in the Hegelian system. Nevertheless, in an effort to represent the universal "ethical" quality of melancholia, Kristeva's privileged melancholic is always male. As we have discovered, her strategy of theorization may lead the female reader into a state of double depression. Moreover, her focus on signifying practice and the melancholy sublime precludes attention to other arenas: economic, social, cultural, and political. As Doane and Hodges have said, "A signifying practice like Kristeva's, a discourse that refuses to discuss the social, political, and economic situation of women (except as symptoms of an archaic relation to a maternal object), can offer little hope for a cure" (77).

Conclusion

Kristeva's *Black Sun* witnesses not only the admirable protean quality of the idea of melancholia but also its continued fascination and grip on the human imagination, one that survives through its endless metamorphoses. This paper has explored the logistics of Kristevan melancholia within the dynamics of melancholia as a specific cultural and pathological phenomenon. Kristeva's conceptualization of melancholia recuperates loss aesthetically. She attributes to her melancholic artists an artistic and fetishistic triumph, achieved through an *Aufhebung* that both posits and sublimates maternal loss. Her theory of melancholia is of considerable importance to the under-

standing of the dynamics of desire and the production of art. Her melancholia is not only a type of gendered disease but also a form of cultural empowerment—for the male. It is a cultural category for the male artist, concomitant with the denial of women's own claims to represent their losses within culture. It remains part of a cultural dynamic predicated on lack, loss, and the maternal. When the melancholic is male, this feminized melancholia can always be converted into an enabling condition; when the melancholic is female, it becomes a contingent circumstance and a dilemma.

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva is taking melancholia as a signifying practice that has given male artists a cultural privilege to display and represent loss, and then to overcome it, transform it into a sign of privileged subjectivity. Like Freud, Kristeva insists that melancholia is a necessary evil desired and instituted by Western metaphysics in order to induce in the melancholic a keener sense of the truth and of the self as well as an unquenchable desire to cure melancholia in an endless sequence of words. Justified by its heightened sense of aesthetic sensibility, the Kristevan melancholia has become an accredited pathology that the “male,” not the “female,” melancholy artist is said to display dynamically, truthfully, and beautifully.

Kristeva concludes her study of melancholia on an intriguing note: “Does not the wonderment of psychic life after all stem from those alternations of protections and downfalls, smiles and tears, sunshine and melancholia?” (*BS* 259). For her, the amazing thing about psychic life is exactly the dynamic alternation of opposing affects. As Kristeva confesses at the beginning of *Black Sun*, when she wrote about/through melancholia, she was savagely thrown back into the radical immanence of melancholia. It is in this immanent dynamic of writing melancholia/melancholy writing that Kristeva transposes melancholia into words. Indeed, her concern in *Black Sun* is to safeguard a dynamic corner for the melancholic, a subject-in-process because, for her, melancholia is the instance which allows us to account for the heterogeneous forces which disrupt the symbolic and refashion art, literature, and culture.

For Kristeva, melancholia is essential to human existence. It is a necessary evil, at once a curse and a blessing: “Without a bent for melancholia there is no psyche, only a transition to action or play” (*BS* 4). Central to Kristeva's theory of melancholia is the resurrected notion of Aristotelian-Ficinian-Freudian melancholia. What Kristeva propounds corresponds to the Aristotelian concept of genial melancholia and the Ficinian notion of heroic melancholia. Both Aristotle and Ficino view melancholia as a blessed curse and a source of insight and creativity. What emerges from *Black Sun* is an image of a melancholy figure, “shadowed” by dark thoughts but “enlightened” by an artist's

aura and sensitivity. This melancholy figure experiences something not unlike the liminality or liminoid of the ritual proposed by Victor Turner,⁴² or that pilgrim's progress through which the afflicted individual gains access to "ultimate truth" or "melancholy jouissance" (*BS* 102).⁴³

Kristeva re-appropriates the Renaissance idea of melancholia and endows this time-honored notion with the modern spirit of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Though still tinged with the "pre-modern" theory of humors and under the auspices of an "ancient" Saturn, the Kristevan melancholia as a signifying practice is bound for a postmodern "ethical" turn. Fluctuating between a pre-modern and postmodern *Zeitgeist*, the essential spirit of Kristevan melancholia is that of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*—a kind of relentless desiring machine for truth and meaning—with an "ethical" twist. Nevertheless, it is in full complicity with the Father and the Symbolic. As Elizabeth Grosz points out,

By avoiding the specificity of women's writings, [Kristeva] also uncritically accepts and affirms the psychoanalytic conception of women and femininity [...]. She never questions the Freudian adoption of the model of the boy's development as a paradigm for the girl as well [...]. Moreover, she accepts Freud's and Lacan's privileging of the phallus as the condition of sexual difference, representation and the symbolic order. Above all, she accepts Freud's patriarchal reduction of women to a telos of maternity. (*Sexual Subversions* 65)

The process whereby the melancholic sets out to master the maternal Thing is not unlike the process of male self-fashioning.

In this paper, rather than repeating the efforts of other scholars who explore more widely disseminated Kristevan concepts such as the semiotic, the *chora*, or the abject, I have examined Kristeva's more recent theoretical formulations in *Black Sun*. In *Gender*

⁴² In *From Ritual to Theatre*, Victor Turner makes a distinction between the liminal and the liminoid. The liminal is the experience within tribal rituals but the liminoid has more independent senses, not constrained by tribal rituals. The "-oid" derives itself from Greek "-eidos," a form or shape; it means "like, resembling" (32). The liminoid is a state or a phase in which people experience the inconsistency of human life, undergoing transformation, especially turning to maturity.

⁴³ The melancholy sublimation of Kristeva smacks of something like a religious ritual: "By representing that unsymbolized as a maternal object, a source of sorrow and nostalgia, but of ritual veneration as well, the melancholy imagination sublimates it and gives itself a protection against collapsing into a-symbolism" (*BS* 165).

Trouble, Judith Butler suggests that it is precisely the mission of feminism to “trouble” gender categories that have been made to seem natural and foundational. The present study on Kristeva’s notion of melancholia is my answer to the question Butler poses in *Gender Trouble*—“What [is the] best way to trouble the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality?” (viii). Indeed, it has proved particularly productive to keep Butler’s remarks in mind while we interrogate Kristeva’s theory of melancholia, a theory important to our understanding of questions of “female trouble” and “the medicalization of women’s bodies.”⁴⁴ The questions thus generated in response to Kristeva’s notion of melancholia have concerned particularly the issue of matricide, the position of the female melancholic, and the gendered efficacy of her theory. It seems to me that the question of gender never troubles Kristeva or is never something which needs to be examined by her. Instead of destabilizing the familiar categories to which women have been confined, Kristeva reinforces them. Repeating the traditional gesture that relegates women to a pre-discursive position, her discourse of melancholia has internalized a conventional gendered anxiety about the maternal body and a time-honored longing for a realm of beauty and the sublime. This discourse is implicated in gendered operations of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, even if it is not linear, rational, and teleological.

My critique of Kristeva’s theory of melancholia is directed at the Oedipal structure and the dialectical sublation that Kristeva subscribes to and reinforces. Much like Walter Benjamin’s “melancholy dialectics” as explicated by Max Pensky, Kristeva’s discourse of melancholia secures “the truest and most powerful historical image of its dialectical structure” (Pensky 32). Benjamin, by reconstructing the gaze of the melancholic,⁴⁵ in the words of Pensky delineates a “melancholy subjectivity” that dialectically unifies insight and despair and thrives on a symbiotic connection between a contemplative subject and the desacralized world of objects.⁴⁶ In the case of Kristeva, “[t]he

⁴⁴ This paper on the Kristevan melancholia is meant to be a “laughable,” “serious play.” As Butler writes,

Consider the fate of “female trouble,” that historical configuration of a nameless female indisposition which thinly veiled the notion that being female is a natural indisposition. Serious as the medicalization of women’s bodies is, the term is also laughable, and laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism. Without a doubt, feminism continues to require its own forms of serious play. (viii)

⁴⁵ In his study of the seventeenth-century baroque *Trauerspiel* [*Play of Mourning*] as a historical structure of feeling, Benjamin, in *The Origin of the German Play of Mourning*, develops his messianic hermeneutics and asserts that a theory of *Trauer* can only be secured “in the description of the world which emerges under the gaze of the melancholic” (90).

⁴⁶ See Pensky, Chapter 2.

sense of a desolating loss of originary meaning, which resonates through Kristeva's analysis," as Pensky says, "touches upon one of the deepest sources of melancholy writing. The category of loss—of life force, of joy, of the originary, pre-symbolic Thing, of 'meaning'—is so central to the idea of melancholy because loss itself is so thoroughly a dialectical concept" (27).

Kristeva remains fixed upon a normative model of sexuality, which is a heterosexual model emphasizing the identification with the father and the "will to signification."⁴⁷ Melancholia rests on the problematic and thus pathological relation between the melancholic and the maternal. Kristeva's assumption in *Black Sun* is "that for women the relation to a primary maternal object is particularly dangerous and an identification with a paternal object is particularly beneficial" (Doane and Hodges 65). While relying on the prediscursive maternal economy as reservoir of creativity and subversion, Kristeva's "will to signification" nevertheless puts great emphasis on "the vital necessity" of matricide and enforces stereotypical sexual differences. In order to become a healthy and productive "member of the symbolic," the melancholic must first identify with the mother, then sever the tie with the mother and assume "a triumph over the death-bearing mother" (*BS* 79). For the male melancholic, melancholia is more a blessing than a curse. It is glorified as beneficial suffering or blessed loss. In other words, the more the melancholy artist suffers, the more he becomes emblematic of superior aesthetic virtues. More than just an undesirable disease, the Kristevan melancholia has become an eloquent and dynamic form of mental disturbance—a special, albeit painful, gift—at the expense of the mother.

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⁴⁷ What Grosz argues in her essay "The Body of Signification" is that the psychoanalytic structure of Kristeva's thinking always submits itself to the constraints of the Oedipal triangle.

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