RESPONSE TO “SCHOLAR’S SESSION,” SPEP 2009

David Farrell Krell

When I first learned of this session on my work I determined to write something for it and not to rely on an extemporaneous response to the panel, whoever they might be and whatever they might say. I suspected that the members of the panel would err on the side of generosity, and I did not relish the thought of correcting their kindness, certainly not off-the-cuff. From time to time, however, I will interrupt my own prepared remarks with italicized passages like this one—written after the event and after I had had the chance to read Peg Birmingham’s and Walter Brogan’s astonishingly kind and perceptive remarks. I both love and despise anecdotes about philosophers who on their deathbeds loudly sigh that no one has ever understood them. Peg and Walter have understood me and my work better than I will ever understand them. My responses to Peg and Walter here, après coup, will not be adequate, nor is the word “gratitude” sufficient to say what I owe them. I realize, as you do, that this is a retrospective, and a retrospective is designed to celebrate a death that has either recently occurred or is just around the corner. Or, if that is too lugubrious, let us agree that a retrospective is about passage. Focus and sobriety are clearly called for, and not ad-libbing, certainly not in the face of serious remarks by a serious panel, no matter how charitable, and not before a distinguished public. As some of you know, my interests and activities have shifted recently, and although it is only for the third time in my adult life (the first shift, in 1962, was from music to European history, the second, in 1967, was from history of ideas to philosophy, the third, from philosophy to fiction writing, is difficult to date inasmuch as I have always dabbled), I owe an explanation to the panel, to you who have done me the kindness of attending, but also and perhaps above all to myself.

The shift to fiction cannot be out of disgruntlement with or disdain for philosophy. I would be an ingrate were I to turn my back on a discipline that gave me the opportunity to have conversations with Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-François Lyotard, the good fortune of breakfasts with Luce Irigaray, lunches and team-taught classes with Françoise Dastur, and suppers with Hélène Cixous, the serendipity of walks up the Chemin Nietzsche with Dominique Jancaud, and the felicity of a friendship over two decades with Jacques Derrida. And think of the teachers I had: in philosophy and phenomenological psychology, André Schuwer, Alphonso Lingis, Reiner Schürmann, Steve Levine, Amedeo Giorgi, Ed Murray; in European history, Donald M. Lowe, Paul Mason, and William G. Storey. Think also of the colleagues and friends, too many to mention, and many of them here; think too of the amazing circle of friends I have worked with at DePaul and in Freiburg; think, finally, of all the Doktorkinder I have had, many of them too here, and the seemingly endless stream of talented and enthusiastic undergraduates—I repeat, only an ingrate would turn his back on such a life. So why the shift toward fiction?

Some astute person once defined golf as a good way to spoil a pleasant walk. I love to walk, but I’m no good at golf. I’m not very good at philosophy, either. I hate arguments, which seem to me another way to spoil a walk. I find it difficult to follow the thread of a thesis for more than a minute or two. As for serious scholarship, it takes more patience, thoroughness, and conceptual skill than I ever possessed. I have the reputation of being a good translator of philosophical texts, but that is a rumor I started myself. I make up for being a fair-to-middlin’ translator by wearing out the pages of my thesaurus. This will sound like false modesty to some of you, I hope, and false modesty, fishing for compliments, is a more despicable sport than even golf. Yet as far as I can tell what I am saying is true. The recent publication by SUNY Press of my translation of Hölderlin’s Der Tod des Empedokles gives me hope, however, and with luck I will continue to do some translating.

How do I judge my own books of philosophy, if I’m allowed to utter anything in addi-
tion to what my colleagues will have said? In preparation for this event, I decided to read three early monographs of mine. The first is out of print and available only in an “electronic version,” whereas the two others, I believe, are still available.

*Postponements: Woman, Sensuality, and Death in Nietzsche*, 1986. The book gathers together Nietzsche’s early plans to compose a drama on the death of Empedocles, material that had a major impact on Nietzsche’s own plans (never realized) to write additional parts for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The book’s topic, in other words, encompasses Nietzsche’s early work on tragedy and his magnum opus—there could hardly be a more important topic in Nietzsche studies. Yet what the book actually does with the material is meager, and the final pages of the book are embarrassing, to say the least—a transparent failure to say what these putative “postponements” are all about and why they should concern us. Rodolphe Gasché, in a review of the book, spotted this weakness and the difficulty that lay behind it: “Krell,” he wrote, “shows himself quite distrustful of the immanent possibilities of philosophy” (*Research in Phenomenology*, 1987, 270).

If that was true of my earliest work, things only got worse. I recall a conversation with David Wood somewhere near a pond in Umbria, a conversation in which he remarked that the difference between us was that whereas he always felt constrained to come down on the side of light I invariably came down on the side of darkness. He was right. Obscurities have always attracted me more than enlightenments. Nathaniel Hawthorne, after reading the first draft of *Moby-Dick*, encouraged Melville to add a larger dose of the “blackness of darkness,” the same opacity that Melville had praised in Hawthorne’s *Mosses from an Old Manse*, and I’ve always felt that Hawthorne was talking to me. More darkness! Melville, of course, was writing fiction. I hadn’t noticed.

*On the Verge: Of Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing*, 1990. (The publisher insisted on inverting the title and subtitle, but “On the Verge” was always the main title for me, and I noticed that Walter Brogan too referred to the book by this title.) To my surprise, I found this book, as I read it recently, to be a thoughtful and sustained enquiry. The book was hard to write: I remember feeling all the while that it was failing. At the time I wrote it I was moved by Faulkner’s description of his masterpiece, *The Sound and the Fury*. He called it his “most splendid failure.” While I won’t claim splendor for *On the Verge*, I do want to say a bit more about how the book found its way to the light of day. I had despaired of it, even though many chapters were already written; the book simply would not come together. A very wise friend, Ute Guzzoni of Freiburg, said to me, “You’re trying to create a solar system. Don’t. Launch a few satellites and then let them tell you where they want to go.” The planned middle part of the book collapsed on the launch pad, but other chapters lifted off, thanks to Ute’s advice. Dawne McCance wrote me last year to say that a student of hers had located a copy of the book and was lost in it. I didn’t know what to think of that. After I myself got lost in it again I decided that the student was lucky.

*Daimon Life: Heidegger and Life-Philosophy*, 1992. The phantasms I entertained in the late 1980s concerning the Greek emphatic prefix *za-*, and a possible *za-*ology for the future, phantasms that haunt the entire book, have not as far as I can see sustained anyone’s research or thinking. This saddens me, especially because everyone is writing about animals these days, so that there was never a better time to pursue advanced *za-*ology. The first three chapters, on *Being and Time*, the early Marburg lecture courses, and the 1929/30 Freiburg lecture course, are probably worth preserving, especially chapter three, on Homer’s immortal horses, those horses that weep tears of mourning, but the rest should perhaps have been jettisoned, I’m not sure. I’m not sure because, frankly, I am still enamored of the topic from start to finish, from *Being and Time* to Irigaray’s *Oblivion of the Air*.

Peg Birmingham’s wonderful weaving of *life, animal, and fiction in her remarks surely has to do with Daimon Life, however, and so I want to insert a further remark about the book here. Peg reminded me of the very strange fact that Heidegger designates both the essence of animality and the essence of a fully appropriate and “authentic” Dasein with the selfsame word: both the world-poor animal and an anxious, world-shaping Dasein are benumbed, “dazed, dazzled, benumbed.” Is this just a mistake on Heidegger’s part? Had he by 1930 for-
gotten what he had written in 1927? Had he overlooked the “abyss of essence” that according to the later “Letter on Humanism” separates human being from every other form of life? Not very likely. More likely is the happenstance that when Dasein is struck by anxiety it suddenly grows intimate with its life, and the further happenstance that life, for all its varieties, is of a piece. Not that the differences fail, of course. Among the strangest of those differences are the tales that human beings tell themselves or write about, especially tales involving the other animals. For instance, fairy tales. Peg refers to some things I’ve written about fairy tales in Lunar Voices and Contagion. What I love about fairy tales is their impossible logarithms: princesses finally succumb to their desire to kiss frogs and find they have to settle for princes. No happy ends, not in the genuine Märchen. “Hansel and Gretel go into the woods and never come out,” as Peg writes. If my own writing nowadays has less to do with fairy tales, it has more to do with myths—with what Schelling called “the oldest narratives” and what Roberto Calasso calls the undulating folds of Apollo’s cloak. Perhaps when a short story responds to the undulations of myth it rises to the level of seriousness that we associate with philosophy—at least as Plato practices it. Plato’s Socrates too never comes out of the woods.

I’ll say no more about my other books, except perhaps this: I’d love to do another book like The Good European, which is a book of photographs of Nietzsche’s work sites, but this time on Hölderlin, Hölderlin walking to work—from Stuttgart to Bordeaux—and then, six months later, walking back home again. I’ve actually proposed such a book to many publishers, but they all write back asking “Hölder-who?” Clearly, this is a book that will not happen.

I have to admit that I am uncertain, more so recently than ever before, about whether I am any better at fiction. Until quite recently things were looking bleak. I certainly cannot plot and I have scant imagination for situation. As for characters, where are my circus animals? What’s keeping them? Occasionally they do show up, and then my life is a delight: I love writing when the characters themselves approach and tell me the words they have always meant to say, the deeds they have always wanted to perform, and the sufferings they have always feared most. And so I plan to persist. Aristotle says, or at least suggests, if I remember well, that every being is good at something, or good for something: the point is to keep on looking. I have published only two of my short stories; my stage play, based on the life of Grete Trakl, although rewritten a dozen times, is not being produced; my film scripts attract dust instead of production companies—and that is probably for the best. Yet it is a pleasure for me to labor on these things. Pleasure? you may say, a bit archly. Why not? I reply, only slightly defensively. And you never know, I may get good at one or other of these very different sorts of writing, each new genre an adventure for me, each incredibly challenging. Not long ago, but before I retired, I sent a sheaf of short stories to my friend Ulrich Halfmann—a professor of American literature and a tough-minded critic who I knew would not soften the blow. After three weeks of deafening silence Ulrich left a voice message on my answering machine, five words, without salutation or complimentary close: “Give up your daytime job.” And so I did.

Walter is not so sure that I did, however, and his doubts have to give me pause. He sees the malformation in me, observes my “two heads.” I would have been satisfied to be Janus-faced: as a Gemini, this doubling is perhaps my birthright. The two heads—one for philosophy and one for literature—are too much for me. These heads converse intimately in my novels, and that is natural enough, since the novels have Nietzsche, Hegel, and Hölderlin as central figures. Yet my two heads threaten to go their separate ways in my more recent writing—for example, in the short stories, where the protagonists have no obvious relation to philosophy. It is therefore all the more remarkable that Walter is able to see the proximity of the story called “Glaciers in January Are Not the Place to Be” to the Hegel chapter of On the Verge. That my two German Alpinists who fall into a crevice of the Hüfi Glacier (only to emerge decades later when the glacier regurgitates their iced corpses) somehow succeed in exploring the shaft of memory that Hegel is either unable or unwilling to enter comes as a bit of a shock to me. A pleasant shock, but still, a shock. Walter may be entirely right, although I am afraid of the consequences of his thought,
especially when he says that “literature needs philosophy” in order to remember our mortal “yearning for the excess of the absolute.” Without such yearning, Walter warns us, literature becomes hackneyed. As I try to unlearn my habits of philosophical and scholarly writing—and such unlearning is very hard for me, a never-ending struggle—I have to remember that if I unlearn too well I become a hack. Two heads are better than one, perhaps, even if a single staggering body has to support the two of them.

What exactly do I want from fiction writing? I want to produce a work. I mean by this, not some grand contraption that moves world and earth, but a minuscule cosmos all its own, a tiny gem, not precious, a mere stone, but cleanly cut and ably set. My models for such a work are almost always musical: a nocturne by Chopin, any one you like—if you’re indifferent, opus 27 number 2. Or, if I may dream in the direction of some of my favorite stories, then something approaching Joyce’s “Araby.” And if it turns out that my friend Ulrich is right about my stories, maybe even “The Dead.” Or how about Hemingway’s perfect story, “The Capital of the World,” or Melville’s outrageous “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!” Why not dream?

But why not a work of philosophy? you may ask. Because, I answer, it has become clear to me that I am not driven by a pervasive and impelling question—for example, the question of being or the question of the trace, or even the question of the question—not compelled by a question or an affirmation that would inspire a philosophical project worthy of the name. As for scholarship, it inspires footnotes, and that’s another way to spoil a pleasant walk.

Perhaps, as I said, from time to time a translation, if only to allow myself to get up close to a fine old book. Translation, however, only as a diversion or stop-gap, a kind of hospital stay, as Hölderlin says of philosophical work in general. Mine will have to be a work of drama or fiction, although certainly not a “novel of ideas.” No one, it seems to me, should begrudge me this chance (however slight) to produce a work, a well-wrought tale or two. Whatever my earlier work has to contribute to the writing of fiction it will contribute; the rest will fall away, or has already done so, and no one is or will be the worse for it. Geminis too get but one head; the best one can hope for is schizophrenia. “The most innocent of occupations,” Hölderlin said of creative writing. Innocent, true; but, also true, full of ruses. This same Hölderlin calls language itself “the most dangerous of gifts.”

It turns out that I have been making my way toward ruse-ridden fiction writing for a long time. Recently I discovered a journal that I had misplaced for many years, and so I looked into it. (Otherwise I never read my journals. What do we keep them for, anyway? For eventual but unlikely autobiography? For uninterested posterity? For repetition compulsion?) Allow me to cite one entry, made on Nietzsche’s birthday, October 15, 1969, which is now forty years ago. I wrote, near Seehausen in Oberbayern:

I’ve been reading Hemingway’s A Movable Feast, about his early years in Paris and his efforts there at writing. . . . I gobble up what the writer writes about writing. . . . But it is all a matter of how we devote our time. What I have so far written is quite bad, if only because I expect to get what I want as soon as I sit down at the desk. One who will not waste time won’t write. I must free myself from my schooling.

That was a year before I completed my dissertation—if not my “schooling.” In retrospect, it seems as though philosophy was the long detour that eventually had to take me back to the main road, fiction. I recall that during my earliest years, even before elementary school, I was forever telling stories, “performing” embellished fairy tales for parent-groups. I even performed such stories for a university class on one occasion; perhaps it was a class in abnormal psychology, I don’t know. I must have been pretty good at it, though. In later years, my mother thought I was good at philosophy, but she had her own reasons for hoping so. She wrote me a note for my fiftieth birthday, two years before she died: “To my . . . son David, who renounced a promising career as a juvenile delinquent and became a sober philosopher instead—while retaining still the joie de vivre of a ten-year-old!” Well, then, from here on out, let it be the joy of life, with a dash of delinquency—and that sounds pretty much like fiction writing. I hope to make it all the way back to my tenth year.

RESPONSE
My tenth year? Only if a ten-year-old knows about love and death. Peg sees in my response to Blanchot’s Kafka the program or profile of much of my own fiction, which, in spite of what I wrote a moment ago, seems to revolve about a single question: Can love stories and love relationships offer something like “short reprieves from the silence and solitude” of mortal writing? Peg senses a shift in my writing from an earlier hope in such reprieves to a more recent skepticism seen in the “negative outline” of the solitary animal that haunts the forest rim. In my response to Peg on the day of the SPEP event, I recalled both my acceptance and my rejection of Lacan’s scorn for the very idea of the saving grace of love: for Lacanian psychoanalysis the lovelorn imaginary is on an endless delusional quest, letting itself be fooled over and over again; such an imaginary does not need to be entertained with love stories—it needs another Lebensschlag upside the head. And yet. And yet. Robert Musil’s Agathe insists that there is no more inspiring canticle in all the world than the lovesick cry of the ass. When we get tired of beating ourselves up for having fallen in love we should always have at our disposal stories of a thousand and one nights of rejuvenating love. Let the psychoanalysts chortle or gnash their teeth. And let the writers write.

Several months ago I was trying to write a story about a second-grader, an eight-year-old, who has to make a speech in front of the class: she opens her mouth but in her terror all that comes out is a spit bubble. I could see that bubble plainly, but I found it terribly difficult to describe in such a way that readers would not laugh at it but see and feel in it a reflection of the girl’s terror. I discovered that words for being are as easy as dynamis and energeia, whereas words for bubble are utterly elusive. Some will find my turn to saliva risible, an absurdly ontic undertaking. All I can say is that according to Heidegger ontology is founded upon and grounded in the ontic—or, if it’s not, it isn’t worth spit.

Hemingway, in the preface to his First Forty-Nine Stories (imagine that: his first forty-nine!) asks for nothing more than a stretch of time to spin out three more novels and twenty-five more stories. His justification? “I know some pretty good ones,” he says. I’m not sure I can say that just yet. After I round up my prodigal circus animals and round off my bubbles, bubbles for being, I’ll let you know. My thanks to Peg Birmingham and Walter Brogan for their careful reading, their thoughts and their questions and their encouragements, to Bob Vallier for his wit and his organizational skills, and to all of you for coming.

DePaul University, Chicago, IL 60614
In this essay I pay tribute to Ewa Ziarek’s political and ethical philosophy, in particular her “ethics of dissensus.” My interest is in the resonance of the concept in her recent work, and its ongoing salience for addressing political problems at the heart of our troubled times. Her book on the topic, *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Ziarek 2001), is remarkably rich in terms of both the theoretical ground it covers and the innovative interventions it makes into debates about the failure of democracy to deliver justice, particularly to women and people of non-white races. My focus, however, is on what I take to be a key innovation of the book—how an ethics of dissensus deals with antagonism. Antagonism should be of central concern to any theory of democracy for two reasons. First, the prevalence of antagonism in contemporary democracies in the form of aggression, hostility, and violence, would seem to attest to the failure of democratic politics to achieve its own vision of justice—equality and freedom through peaceful means. Second, and on the other hand, one of the criticisms of liberal democracy is that its ideals of political consensus and social harmony merely mask a sub-current of violence effected through the subordination and erasure of differences (i.e., “minority” ways of being). It is against this tendency of democratic politics to cover over the repression and subjection of differences that Ziarek posits her ethics of dissensus. An ethics of dissensus is based on the contestation rather than the assimilation of differences. But this raises the question of how to promote ethics as irreducibly antagonistic without endorsing an ideal of sociality as irreducibly hostile.

By way of arriving at Ziarek’s ingenious answers to this question, I go via her recent work on Polish nationalism (2007a). Here she deals with matters very close to (her “original”) home—the role of nationalism in the massacre of Polish Jews in WWII, the complicity of the Polish people, and the wholesale “collective forgetting” of both until recently. I take this path partly because the issue of toxic nationalism is so crucial for a diagnosis of the present; the association of nationalism with ethnic violence is emblematic of so much that is wrong with the world . . . still or again. Ziarek’s intervention into the issue is also pertinent to my analysis because not only is the Polish question missing from her earlier book on dissensus, but also her ethics of dissensus seems to be absent from her critique of Polish nationalism. She relies instead on psychoanalytic theory, in particular the paradigm of melancholia, to explain, not just the complicity of the Polish people in the Holocaust, but also the “transformation of the traumatic events of Polish history into an unconscious collective fantasy” of Polish suffering and innocence (2007a, 314). As enlightening and ingenious as Ziarek’s analysis is, I wonder why it does not draw on her concept of dissensus. Is it that the philosopher needs different conceptual tools when dealing with matters too close to home, or is it that philosophy itself is culturally specific? Is it that the concept of dissensus works for a diagnosis of sex and race relations in the United States (where Ziarek now lives), but not so well for a diagnosis of the origin and dangers of nationalism in Poland? There is something to the proposition that social and political theory retain some cultural specificity, despite our best efforts to expunge the historicity of the experience of the theorist from his or her theory. I, for one, have found that theories of race emerging from U.S. political and continental philosophy, and postcolonial theory emerging from the U.K., are not entirely appropriate for addressing the colonial haunting of present Australian culture by our colonial past and the attendant ongoing erasure of a multiplicity of Indigenous belongings (Diprose 2009). But I would not want to claim that these theories, or indeed the idea that nationalism is a melancholic construction, are
wrong, just that they are not necessarily right for all times and all places. That said, I do find it curious that Ziarek forgets her own concept of dissensus in dealing with the pathologies and injustices of her own cultural heritage when, to me, it would seem so appropriate. Hence, I use this journey to argue that her own concept of dissensus, and the ethico-political ontology it evokes, is a more compelling and powerful conceptual tool for this purpose than Freud’s theory of melancholia.

Melancholic Nationalism

It is not surprising that the Polish-Jewish question is absent from Ziarek’s 2001 book on The Ethics of Dissensus. In ways outlined in her 2007 paper on Polish nationalism, both the complicity of Polish people in the Holocaust, including “the massacre of the Jewish inhabitants of Jedwabne by their Polish neighbors,” and awareness of the strong and ancient Jewish presence in pre-war Polish culture, including in Ziarek’s home town of Bielsk, were gradually erased from Polish post-war collective memory until several exposés appeared beginning in the late 1990s.¹

The only inkling Ziarek had of the recent history of Polish Jewry and its erasure was through her Grandmother’s stories that peppered her childhood—stories of her Jewish pre-war neighborhood and, with regard to the Nazi occupation, stories of the throwing of bread over the ghetto walls. But even then, the significance of her grandmother’s memories did not (could not) register with Ziarek until, thirty years later in 1998, she saw Marian Marzynski’s 1996 documentary Shtetl (about the uncovering of the erasure of the Jewish population from another Polish town, Bransk). Without the opportunity to revisit her grandmother’s recollections face-to-face, her grandmother’s expressions of loss and mourning for her Jewish neighbors, Ziarek “found the concrete details about the life and tragic fate of the Bielsk Jewish community on the Internet” in what she describes as her “virtual prosthesis replacing the amputated history of [her] town” (2007a, 304). I can barely imagine what that experience of awakening would be like. But Ziarek did not turn away from the shock of it all. As testimony to her own responsiveness and her own ethics of dissensus she has sought

PHILOSOPHY TODAY

44

SPEP SUPPLEMENT 2010
poses of resistance against the current regime” (2007a, 307). This entrenched “self-representation of Poles as innocent victims of foreign aggression” (308) takes Ziarek back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to a history of infringements on Polish freedom and the erasure of the Polish State. She argues that what Polish national identity inherits from this period is a “compensatory paradigm of Polish nationality associated with the topos of messianic suffering” rivaling the Jewish self-image (309). This is the territory of Ziarek’s account of Polish nationalism as a melancholic structure, a pathological structure that became the source of the violence perpetrated against Polish Jews in World War II and its subsequent disavowal.

Ziarek takes up Freud’s idea that melancholia “can arise in response not only to the death of a loved person but also to the loss of . . . ‘some abstraction,’ such as ‘Fatherland’ or ‘liberty’” (Ziarek 2007a, 314). In such cases, she argues, what would be lost is the possibility of “collective identification”—this loss would be what is repudiated and internalized in (often sadistic) melancholic nationalism. To make the case, Ziarek juxtaposes this point with Freud’s account, in Totem and Taboo, of the role of the paternal function in the formation of social bonds and the nation. On this account, symbolic filial parricide founds the State but also ensures that sociality is driven by guilt, rebelliousness, and ambivalent mourning of the loss of the father. Without going into the details of Ziarek’s argument, it suffices to say that her unique claim is that, because of the loss of the Polish “Fatherland” in the early nineteenth century and the usurping of the symbolic place of national identifications by successive occupying powers, Polish nationalism emerged as a kind of collective melancholy. Within this complex, identification with, or rebellion against, political authority is substituted by identification with messianic suffering. And, under conditions of extreme political repression, such as during the Nazi and Soviet occupations in the twentieth century, the sadism of melancholia can manifest in outbreaks of violence against those whose existence is even more precarious (Ziarek 2007a, 318–19). This analysis also provides an explanation for the impossibility of the Polish survivors of World War II acknowledging complicity in that Holocaust or mourning the loss of their Jewish neighbors. Ziarek argues that the perverse reversion of sadistic violence into inward masochistic suffering provides the melancholic collectivity with a “double alibi”: the “alibi of existence” (“I suffer therefore I am”) and the “alibi of innocence” (317–18).

Ziarek’s analysis is intricate in the way it weaves the politico-historical context of the Polish-Jewish question with the toxic effects of aspiring toward a collective national identity. Attending to that context seems to me to be an essential ingredient in the process of redressing the damage done to Jewish and Polish cultures by the Holocaust and its forgetting. I also share Ziarek’s commitment to an idea of a political unconscious, or, rather, to some idea of a socio-historical inheritance and political imaginary that shapes us in ways that are largely obscure to us. Equally essential to reconciliation and justice-to-come is becoming more aware of those formative forces. But I remain skeptical of the need for the notion of melancholic collectivity to explain the structure and operation of this historical inheritance. While melancholia may account for an individual psyche formation arising from a failure to mourn, it is unclear how this translates to a whole culture, unless we assume that a secure sense of belonging to a nation or to a collective identity is a real possibility that could then be “lost,” and that everyone is the same in the way they deal with loss or in the way they inherit a political imaginary.2

Moreover, to the extent that the Freudian concepts of melancholia and social formation remain entrenched in a discourse of symbolic paternal law and a story of the origin of sociality and nationhood that is as mythical and problematic as the social contract, it does not allow for the ambiguity and ecstasy in identity formation, individual and collective, and seems to reiterate rather than allow for the transformation of the forces of oppression.3

It therefore does not explain those who experienced the loss of Jewish neighbors and did not forget. It does not explain Ziarek’s grandmother whose fond memories of pre-war Jewish culture remained vividly intact for as long as she lived, along with recollections of moments of resistance to prohibitions against aiding her Jewish neighbors. Presumably, recent exposés of these troubled times by Ziarek and
others of her generation will also be uncovering countless other Polish people, including Ziarek herself, who would be uncomfortable if not appalled by this history and resistant to the cultural amnesia that allows it to continue to do its work. Nor is it clear how a collective, as opposed to an individual, can move from melancholia to “traversing” this “destructive fantasy” to invent what Ziarek calls for in her conclusion: “new, more ethical modes of collectivity and solidarity, no longer predicted on the narcissistic investment in its own suffering but more concerned with the responsibility for the suffering of others” (2007a, 322). Other aspects of Ziarek’s analysis, however, do open a path to this alternative, as does her notion of an ethics of dissensus.

**Ethics of Dissensus**

Ziarek’s seminal idea of an ethics of dissensus foregrounds this responsibility for the suffering of others that she calls for in her analysis of Polish nationalism. But it does this on the basis of an ontology that questions the notion of self-present subjectivity and, indirectly, the idea of a shared national identity. By defining an ethics of dissensus in terms of the contestation of differences, sexual, racial, and ethnic, Ziarek lifts moral obligation for the well being of others from the private domain to the public domain of politics. But rather than couch this ethics in familiar terms of care, from the opening paragraph of her 2001 book she equates dissensus with disagreement, struggle, and antagonism. By antagonism, Ziarek does not mean the usual definition—“the mutual resistance of two opposing forces, physical or mental; active opposition to a force; [or the opposition] between two things” (OED). Within a liberal framework, this usual concept of antagonism would construe an ethics of dissensus as promoting the opposition, struggle, or mutual resistance between different already constituted identities and centers of political power. On this model, ethico-politics would be understood as a war of the sexes or a battle between races and ethnic groups that struggles to give oppressed minorities more recognition. Or, if Ziarek were working within a Hegelian or communitarian paradigm of democratic community, antagonism, so defined, would not be what operates between already constituted identities, but what constitutes subjectivity and sociality at their core. Within such a paradigm an ethics of dissensus, rather than settling for the unification of differences in the constitution of shared communal identity, would reject this “rationalist and universalist framework and posit . . . instead discursive operations of power and social antagonism as the irreducible dimension of democratic politics” (Ziarek 2001, 2). Sexual, racial, and ethnic identities would remain contested rather than subsumed under a universal norm in the interests of social harmony.

While there are traces of these conventional understandings of antagonism operating in Ziarek’s thesis, these tend to emerge more in critiques of the liberal and Hegelian paradigms from which she departs. Indeed, if she stayed with such conceptions of antagonistic sociality, then that would be insufficient for the justice and reconciliation she seeks. For, as Levinas suggests, a philosophy or democratic politics based on antagonism between differences too easily spills over into an ontology of war that not only suspends morality by doing battle with the other, but also and simultaneously destroys the principles of equality and freedom of differences that ground democratic sociality. As Ziarek draws qualified inspiration from Levinas’s ethics, she is only too aware of this connection between antagonism and an ontology of war. So, rather than adhering to conventional notions of antagonism, Ziarek’s ethics of dissensus transforms them. Below, I outline two ways that she revises these notions of antagonism in support of her positive account of an ethics of dissensus. My aim is to show how beneficial that ethics is for Ziarek’s diagnosis of Polish nationalism as well for a myriad of other contemporary political and moral dilemmas that face us all.

First, the antagonism that characterizes Ziarek’s ethics is not between different already constituted identities, nor is it the opposition between identity and difference characteristic of Hegelian models of subject and community formation. Ziarek’s vision of a just sociality is not of hostile oppositional relations between the sexes or between different races. Rather, what is unique about Ziarek’s ethics of dissensus is that the antagonism at its centre is between freedom of self-responsibility for
one’s own affective becoming and responsibility for the other’s uniqueness. This is partly a battle between two modes of poststructural thought that have both moved beyond liberal and Hegelian paradigms. One mode is a Foucauldian aesthetics of self that grounds ethics in practices of freedom. These practices are transformative techniques of self that contest normalizing and totalizing social and political discourses, including those that promise security in a uniform national collective identity. The other mode of poststructuralist thought influencing Ziarek’s ethics of dissensus is Levinas’s ethics of responsibility for the other’s alterity or uniqueness. Justice for oppressed minorities cannot be, for Ziarek, a question of either kind of ethics by itself. A Foucauldian ethics of becoming that resists normalization and totalization would privilege individual freedom of care for the self and self-responsibility, irrespective of the privilege that self enjoys and with only secondary consideration of the welfare of others. On the other hand, an ethics based entirely on responsibility for the other’s suffering and uniqueness, even though acknowledging the centrality of being-with-others to ethical sociality, would hold the self hostage to the needs of others irrespective of race, sex, or the attendant privilege enjoyed by either party. Ziarek argues that both kinds of ethics co-appear in the midst rather than outside political subjection and are necessary to each other. This suggests that the relation she posits between them in her ethics of dissensus has already moved beyond conventional ideas of antagonism as the mutual resistance of two opposing forces.

But second, in setting up an ethics of dissensus as arising between these two kinds of ethics, Ziarek also posits an antagonism between two aspects of subjectivity and sociality. On one side is the normalizing constitution of sexed and raced embodied subjectivity either through disciplinary and bio-power (Foucault) or through totalizing antagonistic political judgment (Levinas). On the other hand, and simultaneously, there is the subversion of these processes of subjection either by affective becoming (Foucault) or by the other’s alterity (Levinas). The relation Ziarek posits between subjection and its contestation and undoing, while antagonistic in some sense, is, again, not an oppositional relation between mutually exclusive forces. Ziarek, unlike some of the theorists with whom she engages, does not assume that affective becoming or the other’s alterity are outside of and in opposition to normalizing or totalizing political discourses. Rather, corporeal subjectivities, while sexed, raced, and positioned in relations of conflict through socio-political systems of meaning and value, are always also open to transformation or affective becoming (sexed and raced identity is always contested as it is lived). Moreover, the uniqueness and moral value of these bodies is only expressed to others within sociality, suggesting that democratic sociality is grounded in providing the conditions for the expression of that uniqueness. In her book on *The Ethics of Dissensus*, Ziarek focuses on the limits to the expression of meaning within which sexed and raced bodies are subjected. As she shows there, it is not pure affective becoming or alterity that marks this limit to the expression of meaning within normalizing discourses. Nor, therefore, can justice be won via expressions of resistance arising from either of these sources. Rather, it is at this limit to the expression of meaning that sexed and raced bodies are rendered senseless by the social and political discourses through which they dwell. It is with this failure of the expression of the uniqueness of bodies that the antagonism of interest to Ziarek arises and it is at this limit that an ethics of dissensus takes place. In her ethics of dissensus, then, antagonism is not so much mutual resistance between two opposing forces or opposition between different things. Rather, violent antagonism marks a failure in the mutual exposure of expressions of uniqueness that is meant to characterize democracy.

Ziarek signals this transformation in the meaning of antagonism most explicitly where she formulates her ethics of dissensus in terms of Lyotard’s “differend.” She defines the differend in the following terms: “Signaled by the lack of judgment applicable to both parties, the differend represents the extreme case of the social conflict that cannot be resolved because the wrong is not signifiable in the idiom in which the articulation and regulation of the conflict takes place” (Ziarek 2001, 83). The differend marks an event at the limit of representation, an injustice effected by antagonistic and totalizing political discourse but inexpressible in its terms. While Ziarek describes
the differend as radical antagonism, she also describes it as an “agitated passage” between the political and the ethical, a kind of eruption of totalizing political discourses marking the effects and limit of systems of meaning within which political subjection takes place. This inexpressible antagonism is not a sign of affective becoming or the other’s alterity erupting in opposition or resistance to sociality, power, or politics. Rather, such conflict is a sign that the bodies involved have been deprived of the means of expressing the uniqueness of their becoming to others by the very sociality, power, and politics that subjects them. This would be an alternative way to understand the effect of the totalizing forces of the Nazi and Soviet occupations on the Polish population (in conjunction with Ziarek’s 2007 analysis of the other elements of Polish history that go toward the construction of a political imaginary of shared suffering and political impotence).

Biopolitics, Nationalism, and Dissensus

This understanding of inexpressible antagonism precipitated by extreme political duress is enhanced by Ziarek’s recent interventions into biopolitical theory, in particular her sympathetic critique of Giorgio Agamben’s idea of “bare life” (Ziarek 2008). Ziarek is sympathetic with biopolitical theory insofar as it provides an account of political subjection that acknowledges the mutation of sovereign power into biopower and disciplinary power. On Foucault’s account of biopower, the target of political power in modern democracies is not the already constituted political subject (bios), nor is political power wielded through the exclusion of some forms of human life from the polis. Rather, the target of biopower is biological life (zoe), which is “regularized” under a political rationality that attends to the health and welfare of the population as a whole. Biopower aims at maintaining “species life,” but does so by importing norms of race, sex, family, sexuality, health etc., into the governance of biological life (Foucault 2003, 239–64). This is where biopower does its damage. As Ziarek explains, Agamben (1998) modifies Foucault’s analysis of biopower (and Arendt’s Aristotelian distinction between bios and zoe) to argue that, with the emergence of a “dangerous link between citizenship, nation, and biological kinship,” the salient object and effect of political power is neither bios nor zoe but “bare life” (Ziarek 2008, 89–92). “Bare life,” from the cellular level to damaged forms of human life, is that which is “stripped of political significance and exposed to murderous violence” within the political and with impunity (Ziarek 2008, 90).

While Ziarek does not use Agamben’s idea of “bare life” for her account of Polish nationalism and its effects, it is clear that she is aware of the potential to do so. As she suggests in her discussion of “bare life,” Agamben’s analysis is most salient in accounting for the genocides of the twentieth century. Presumably, he would say, for instance, that under the Nazi and Soviet regimes much of the Polish population would have been reduced to “disposable bare life” (Ziarek 2008, 92). But, Ziarek contends, there are two limitations to his account of biopower that would prevent him from taking such an analysis much further. In addressing these limitations Ziarek implicitly draws on her earlier ethics of dissensus and, in doing so, I argue, makes the idea of “bare life” more pertinent for her own account of the Polish-Jewish question and other historically specific political problems. The first limitation with Agamben’s account that Ziarek raises is that he misses the way that bare life is “implicated in the gendered, sexist, colonial, and racist configurations of the political,” in the sense that, through the biopolitical erasure of differences, bare life is determined by the “destruction of...historically specific way[s] of life” and “it suffers different” degrees and “forms of violence” (Ziarek 2008, 89 and 93). As bare life, for Agamben, is totally stripped of political significance to the point of being equivalent to undifferentiated “living dead,” he cannot account for the difference between genocide and mass rape, for example (Ziarek 2008, 93). On the other hand, by insisting on the symbolic, cultural, political, and historical specificity of bare life, Ziarek shows how slavery in modern America was dependent on, and justified by, norms of rationality, gender, and animality (2008, 95–96). Equally, it could be argued with regard to the problem of Polish nationalism, that, while Polish life in general may have been brutalized under the Nazi occupation, only certain sections of the population were
vulnerable to reduction to bare life, depending on the extent of their deviation from historical and imposed national norms of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and health. Those who lined up on the side of sovereign violence and/or disavowed it in the end had their double alibi provided by the historical political imaginary that Ziarek describes in her analysis of Polish nationalism. However, taking Ziarek’s idea of dissensus into account, such an alibi would never stick completely; it would not prevent a contestation of differences or an inexpressible antagonism from disrupting the biopolitical process of totalization. This brings us to Ziarek’s second criticism of Agamben.

The second limitation of Agamben’s account of bare life that Ziarek addresses is an absence of an account of resistance to this biopoliticization of life. While he may be right in accounting for the way that modern politics delimits some forms of life that are subjected to “unlimited exposure to violation, which does not count as a crime,” he fails to provide any “theory of ‘emancipatory possibilities’ of modernity” (Ziarek 2008, 90 and 93). Ziarek’s ethics of dissensus, on the other hand, points to such possibilities. On Ziarek’s account, “inexpressible antagonisms,” such as the Polish complicity with the extermination of Jewish Poles during the Nazi occupation, call for an ethical response, that bears witness to that injustice and the uniqueness of the ones who suffer through it. The response called for in Ziarek’s book, *The Ethics of Dissensus*, is “responsibility that never ceases to obligate us to find the means of expression and compensation for forgotten wrongs” (Ziarek 2001, 5).

Finding the means of expressing that injustice is a practice of freedom, but a practice that falls, not to the victims of injustice, but to the social players who witness the event. That practice, that ethical judgment, puts into question and seeks to transform the socio-political systems of meaning that have given rise to the dissensus. This includes biopolitical regimes that posit the possibility of collective nationalism (or uniform “species life”) through the erasure or “regularization” of differences. This, then, is how Ziarek’s notion of antagonism links ethics based on freedom of self-responsibility for one’s own affective becoming and that based on responsibility for the other’s uniqueness. A dissensus that signifies the suffering of others on our collective watch, but that exceeds our powers of understanding, prompts a redefinition of freedom “as an engagement in transformative praxis” of our criteria of justice and rules of engagement; this is a transformative practice of freedom that is “motivated by obligation for the Other” (2).

This ethics of dissensus is also an ethics of admission of our complicity in others’ suffering and an ethics of forgiveness. And forgiveness is a rendezvous that actively works for the healing of wounds that erase differences to open up existence again to the expression, love, and contestation, of differences.

We do not need to go very far to appreciate how Ziarek’s ethics of dissensus could address a myriad of other political and social problems aside from those addressed here. This is another aspect of Ziarek’s work that I admire—she always engages with actual problems of injustice. Her ethics notices instances of injustice that cannot be expressed as such by the socio-political systems of meaning that gave rise to them. Her ethics notices that ideas of national identity feature in such events to position and as-good-as justify others as the victims of injustice, but in ways that, under legal and biopolitical principles of blindness to differences, may be forgotten or go unnoticed. An ethics of dissensus would say that these events shock and shame all of us, or they should, because they arise from, and so reflect, the systems of meaning and justice under which so many of us prosper and so are events that cannot be dismissed as the work of a particular group of agents who have somehow failed that system. For that reason Ziarek’s ethics would not seek the means of expressing the injustice by simply pointing the finger at the immediate perpetrators of violence. Rather, her ethics would call on those who are shocked and ashamed to contest the ideals of national identity and of uniform “species life” that justify violence and antagonism and that silently condone if not foster the event of dissensus. Ziarek’s recent work on Polish nationalism shows that she practices what she has theorised and sometimes in the most personal domain of the political.
WORKS CITED


ENDNOTES

1. Two documents that Ziarek discusses that have played a crucial role in revealing to her this aspect of Polish history are Jan Tomasz Gross’s book Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and Marian Marzynski’s 1996 documentary Shtetl. Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, “Melancholic Nationalism and the Pathologies of Commemorating the Holocaust in Poland,” in Dorota Glowacka, ed., Imaginary Neighbors: Mediating Polish-Jewish Relations after the Holocaust (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books 2007), 302–03.

2. Elsewhere I argue against a similar generalization in Judith Butler’s claim that heterosexual identity is a melancholic construction in the sense that it amounts to a failure to mourn a lost possibility (same-sex love), a possibility “lost” through a social prohibition (cf. Diprose, Corporeal Generosity [Albany: SUNY Press, 2002], chapter 5). Ziarek’s account of Polish nationalism as a melancholic construction is more complex but it shares this one feature with Butler’s account: it applies a model of individual psyche formation to account for a wider shared identity without questioning the extent to which any identity can be said to be common. On the other hand, Ziarek’s discussion of Butler’s thesis on melancholia alongside Derrida’s analyses of impossible mourning indicates a deep appreciation of the operation of alterity in identity formation, which implies not only that individual identity based on successful mourning of the loss of another is questionable but also and equally so is an idea of shared national identity that could be subsequently “lost.”

3. This formulation is indebted to a conversation with Tina Chanter about the political salience of the concept of melancholia. However, she does not necessarily share my reticence about applying psychoanalytic concepts of individual psyche formation to analysis of political or cultural phenomena.

4. Levinas’ more succinct account of the relation between his idea of ethics and a political “ontology of war” can be found in the Preface to Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

University of New South Wales, NSW. 2052, Australia