Chapter 4

Melancholia for Martí

Clearly playing on a metaphor of a socially constructed domain of power, Sigmund Freud’s reference to conscience as “among the major institutions of the ego” (Freud 1974, 243) suggests not only that conscience is instituted, produced, and maintained within a larger polity and its organizations but that the ego and its various parts are also accessible through a metaphorical language that attributes a social content and structure to these presumably psychic phenomena. Although Freud begins his essay “Mourning and Melancholia” by insisting on the indisputably “psychogenic nature” (Freud 1974, 243) of the melancholia and mourning under consideration in the essay, he also provides social metaphors that not only govern the topographic descriptions of melancholy’s operation but also implicitly undo his own claim to provide a specifically psychogenic explanation of these psychic states (Butler 1997, 178).

A Depathologized Collective Melancholia

The cult of José Martí in the Cuban national narrative goes beyond an extended act of mourning for the loss of the national martyr-hero and is better understood as a social form of melancholia. In this chapter, I argue that the obsessive reproduction, dissemination, regulation, and veneration of Martí’s visual images—exemplified in this chapter through film, photographs, drawings, and paintings—are attempts by people within the Cuban national narrative to express a sense of loss, seemingly unable to overcome their feeling of mourning. In other words, the Cuban iconographic
obession with Martí’s image is symptomatic of Freudian melancholia and reflects several key tenets of the psychoanalytic concept as theorized by Judith Butler, David L. Eng, and David Kazanjian (Butler 1997; Eng and Kazanjian 2003a). Freudian psychoanalysis indicates that in the process of mourning, the passionate force that unites the mourner with the lost object (the image of the deceased Martí in this case) wishes to die with it; nevertheless, the survival instinct demands the right to keep living. If mourning for the lost object is to be overcome, the nature of one’s feeling about the missing object must be transformed: one gradually learns to accept the object as dead instead of continuing to desire its living presence, ignoring reality’s verdict and therefore prolonging the intensity of suffering. In this understanding of mourning, the subject also substitutes new objects of affection for the lost object.

While Freud at times wavers between pathologization and universalism in his description of melancholia, my interpretation resists such pathologization and understands melancholia as more akin to what Eng and Kazanjian explain in the introduction to *Loss*: “[W]e find in Freud’s conception of melancholia’s persistent struggle with its lost objects not simply a ‘grasping’ and ‘holding’ on to a fixed notion of the past but rather a continuous engagement with loss and its remains. This engagement generates sites of memory and history. While mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia’s continued and open relations to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understanding of lost objects” (Eng and Kazanjian 2003b, 4).

They expand their view of a revised melancholia by connecting it to Butler’s:

Ultimately, we learn, the work of mourning is not possible without melancholia. [. . . ] In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud comes to this conclusion by understanding that the ego is constituted through the remains of abandoned object-cathexes. As a psychic entity, the ego is composed of the residues of its accumulated losses. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler expands upon this revised notion of melancholia, arguing that the incorporative logic of melancholia founds