This essay builds on the theory of “new individualism” to explore its psychosocial ramifications (Elliott and Lemert, 2006, 2009b; Elliott, 2008, 2009, 2010; Elliott and Urry, 2010). I have argued elsewhere that the conditions and consequences of new individualism are especially evident in the new economy of high finance, media and technology industries. “New individualism” penetrates the very core of culture and institutional life, and represents a kind of shorthand for describing various and disparate modalities that shape, and are shaped by, global social transformations. The key institutional drivers of new individualism are (a) continual reinvention, (b) instant change, (c) speed, and (d) short-termism or episodicity. I elaborate this theoretical work by examining the psychic and emotional contours of a life lived in the new individualist fast lane. In so doing I draw on psychoanalysis—in a necessarily partial and restricted way—to focus on the melancholic elements of new individualism.

The new individualist thesis: The sociological backcloth

As originally formulated, the theory of the new individualism comprises four core dimensions: a relentless emphasis on self-reinvention; an endless hunger for instant change; a fascination with social acceleration, speed and dynamism; and a preoccupation with short-termism and episodicity (Elliott and Lemert, 2009a; Elliott and Urry, 2010; Elliott, 2013). The argument is that a new individualism can be deciphered from the culture in which people live their lives today—especially (but not only) for those living in the polished, expensive cities of the West. Corporate networking, short-term project work, organizational downsizing, self-help manuals, compulsive consumerism, cybersex, instant identity
makeovers and therapy culture: these are just some of the core features of global individualist culture, and immersion in such an individualist world carries profound emotional consequences for individuals’ private and public lives.

The thesis of new individualism rests on the claim that individualism, the moral and social ideal, has undergone, in our times, still another transformation. “Individualism,” the concept, was coined in the 1830s by Alexis de Tocqueville to describe the bourgeois gentlemen he observed in America who, having acquired means and manners, lived as if to cut themselves off from the masses. Thereafter, the individualism Tocqueville associated with the brash inventions of the still adolescent American culture of the nineteenth century became united with the older ideals of the European bourgeoisie. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, all this began to change as European critical theorists challenged the liberal ideal of the cutoff individual freed from the fetters of common life. The global wars and holocausts of the twentieth century required the concept to adjust to the evidences that individuals were subject to terrible manipulations of political ideologies, social forces, capitalist economies, and the like. Hence the emergence of “manipulated individualism” in the discourse of critical social theory.

Following the wars of the first half of the twentieth century, another vision of individualism arose. In the affluent superabundance of postwar America, individualism appeared neither heroically arrogant (as Tocqueville had it) nor tragically threatened (as the German critical theorists thought) but now tragically isolated. David Riesman, in The Lonely Crowd (Riesman, Glazer, and Denny, 2001), put forth the idea of a mature modern individualism in which the productive force of the entrepreneur had fallen into a sad sort of conformism. The theory as it turned out was ironic. As individualism lapsed into conformism, so the individual became increasingly isolated, cutoff; hence isolated individualism. Then, as the earlier revisions were responses to perturbations of the tragic 1920s and the conformist 1950s, in the 1990s still another new individualism was called forth by the then (and still) strange effects of globalization. What has been termed reflexive individualism is a way of underscoring that globalization, whatever its benefits, entails risks and risks require individuals to reflect coherently on their changing circumstances—and thus to revise their interior and exterior agendas to risks and costs of the new global order.

In order to better grasp the confluence of interior and exterior changes in peoples’ lives I developed. At the core of this new individualist