

MELODY AND MELANCHOLIA: PHOEBE BRIDGERS AND THE GRIEVING WHITE WOMAN

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Phoebe Bridgers' *Instagram* profile picture is a selfie of her crying in the bath, gold eyeshadow and mascara running down her cheeks. Since her debut album in 2017, Bridgers has been known for producing music laden with personal sorrows. Almost five years later, following her second album, Bridgers is still in mourning. She is "Alive with Melancholy," according to the *New York Times* (Marchese), and "Very, Very Sad" according to *W* magazine (Hirschberg). Bridgers' persona of grief fits into the discussion surrounding pathological grief, introduced by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud defines "melancholia" as a state of perpetual, pathological mourning, where the subject loses interest in everything besides mourning (244). But Bridgers' sadness is more complicated than Freud proposes. When mourning is no longer an internal affair, but something performed for viewers to consume, outward social forces dictate the nature of this mourning more than the individual mourner. With the rise of artists like Bridgers—those female indie singers the world expects to keep singing about loss—how can we integrate society into Freud's individualist model of melancholia? How do individuals cope when their mourning becomes a sought-after commodity?

Melancholia, Freud argues, is trapped in an individual's unconscious and reveals internal, pathological affliction. Unlike in mourning, individuals are unconsciously unable to pinpoint what exactly they have lost, and thus cannot let go of or recover from it (Freud 244-46). By Freud's definition, Bridgers exhibits characteristics of melancholic mental illness, her discography steeped in personal experiences of grief. "Funeral" reflects on ideating suicide as a result of grieving the death of a friend, and "Motion Sickness" deals with mourning the loss of a lover despite suffering abuse from them. From deaths to lost lovers to self-hatred, Bridgers indiscriminately mourns it all, the sources of her grief perhaps becoming peripheral to the grief itself. On *Spotify*, she's featured in playlists like "Sad Indie" and "sad girl starter pack." The top search result in user-made playlists, a "complete playlist of everything," features a snapshot of Bridgers with makeup-smudging tears reminiscent of her *Instagram* profile, as if this stereotypically feminine depiction of grief encapsulates her discography. Bridgers' artistic identity of solely sadness typifies Freud's model of melancholia. Thus, in applying Freud to Bridgers, we might conclude that Bridgers suffers from internal and psychological damage that refuses to let her escape melancholia.

However, Bridgers isn't alone as a melancholic artist. Many others, particularly white, cis, women, are known for their sad personas. And throughout history, the art of white women as a whole has stereotypically been viewed as "tragic" and "forlorn"

(Mooney 178). Essayist Leslie Jamison notes historical examples of sad white women in a personal piece on melancholia: in 1712, “The Rape of the Lock” depicts a woman mourning the forced removal of a lock of hair; in 1897, *Dracula* features women being drained of blood; throughout her career in the 20th century, poet Sylvia Plath composed piece after piece about personal agonies (Jamison). Why would white, female subjects of art be psychologically predisposed to melancholia?

Freud’s explanation of melancholia as an issue within one’s own unconscious cannot account for patterns of melancholia within a social group. The questioning of Freud’s focus on internal, “one-person psychology” comes up in “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia” by writer David Eng and psychotherapist Shinhee Han (345). They argue that exterior influences on certain social groups can be one cause of melancholia in denying them the ability to escape reminders of their loss, leading to “unresolved” loss (Eng and Han 344). Specifically focusing on Asian American melancholia, Han and Eng observe that racial stereotypes force people of color to be perpetually reminded of their estrangement from Americanness and whiteness, thus grieving for this lost ideal perpetually (345). Han and Eng expand the scope of the causes of melancholia: in addition to internal forces, social forces can also incite melancholia, and likely do when entire demographics are involved.

The phenomenon of the sad white female artist, too, is socially rather than individually catalyzed. As a male-dominated world paints them as objects of desire, women often have to emphasize various aspects of femininity to be attractive—feminine pain and weakness being one—in order to be sellable (Dibben 334). Though not racial stereotypes, stereotypes of desirable femininity also force specific demographics into melancholia. Jamison cites Susan Sontag, who observes that the grief of women is “interesting” and alluringly “vulnerable,” and that “the melancholy character [is] a superior one” (qtd. in Jamison). Perceived by society as attractive and valued above other appearances, melancholia is a look that society asks women to take on, and praises them for. Because of this expectation placed on women, female artists do not always become melancholic, or become labeled as melancholic, of their own accord.

Bridgers is self-aware of the demands on her suffering. In her song “Savior Complex,” she sings, “Baby, you’re a vampire / You want blood and I promised.” She purposefully aligns herself with women stereotyped into baring their pain, invoking a lover-turned-Dracula that asks for her blood. Contrary to Freud, Bridgers is pigeonholed into melancholia by societal expectations that demand for her to keep revisiting sites of personal loss for popular consumption. In *W* magazine, when the interviewer asks whether she writes sad music “to release her demons,” Bridgers responds, “Perhaps . . . It can put you in a box, where you feel like you can’t write anything but heartfelt songs that offer an emotional release . . . Capitalism commodifies women’s pain.” (Hirschberg). Bridgers remains unconvinced that her music is a personal pursuit to cope with inner troubles, answering with a doubtful

“perhaps.” Instead, she understands her ontology of sadness to be a product of societal—specifically capitalistic—forces. This commodification of women’s pain puts Bridgers in a melancholic box, being asked to produce song after song about loss. This metaphoric boxing-in suggests, furthermore, that outside of a melancholic space, Bridgers lacks existence.

As Bridgers performs melancholia through her music, her melancholia erases her own identity. In melancholia, Bridgers becomes the subject and object of grief as her self is lost to stereotypes of womanhood. Freud notes that self-loss is a principal result of melancholia as a subject identifies with what they have lost so much that they mourn their own ego alongside the object, that their ego itself becomes an object to be annihilated (252). Eng and Han further find self-mourning to be an inevitable result of stereotyping, observing that the model minority myth turns Asian Americans themselves into the lost object as they overwrite their identity with a stereotyped one: “Asian Americans are forced to mimic the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society—in order to be at all . . . mimicry can operate only as a melancholic process” (350). The sad woman stereotype, too, demands mimicry from female artists to please consumers, to “be at all.” In playing into these stereotypes, what Jamison calls “limited and outmoded conceptions of womanhood,” women “no longer fully own their feelings.” It can “[start] to feel like you’re playing a character . . . It can get dangerous,” Bridgers remarks (Hirschberg). She acknowledges that by mimicking something she isn’t—an appearance of perpetual sadness—she becomes an exemplary “character” of womanhood to sell to the public eye, endangering her real self.

Eng and Han liken this Freudian self-mourning to being “haunted by ghosts,” reminders of parts of your identity that you have been forced to shed (349). Bridgers has come to terms with becoming spectral: “A haunted house with a picket fence / To float around and ghost my friends / No, I’m not afraid to disappear,” she sings with conviction on “I Know the End,” adding extra emphasis on the word “no.” She acknowledges her own addiction to pain: “After my first record, my mom thought she was going to have to intervene, because every song was so depressing. In fact, I probably needed that, but hey . . .” (Hirschberg). Though she admits to the severity of being caught in a cycle of melancholia, to the extent that outward intervention would be required to stop it, she brushes it off with a flippant “but hey . . .” Willingly, Bridgers subjects herself to the image of the ghostly, blood-drained woman that society demands, and thus falls into melancholia.

If conformation to stereotypes of desirable womanhood is etiological to melancholia, how does race factor in? The sad woman trope is most often a sad *white* woman (Mooney 181). In many ways, Bridgers’ life ironically fits the model of unattainable ideals—whiteness and middle-class values—that people of color grieve (Eng and Han 345). Bridgers confesses, “I’m a white girl from Pasadena. I went to a very nice school and had a bunch of friends” (Hirschberg). Perhaps her melancholia

is tinted with her racial and class privilege and her upbringing in an idyllic suburb as much as it is with her womanhood. In her music videos, Bridgers superimposes her sadness onto worlds of whiteness and wealth, depicting grief that is somehow beautiful. In “Smoke Signals,” Bridgers stands at the center of a gothic ballroom decked out in chandeliers and elegant drapes, a crowd of white people swaying around her. Their dark clothing and slow dancing make the scene funeralsque, but their mourning exists in a definitively white, high-class world. White-only spaces crop up in “Motion Sickness,” too, where Bridgers scooters through a picket-fenced suburb, winding up in a karaoke bar, performing in front of a full audience of white people. This alignment of Bridgers’ grief with whiteness comes hand in hand with the beautification of her grief, as the neon lights of the bar illuminate her face as she sings, or as the camera pans out on her in a gorgeous ballroom. Ultimately, the sadness of a white, wealthy class is associated with beauty.

It is because Bridgers’ grief is romanticized by the fantasies of whiteness and wealth that it’s all the more desirable. Han and Eng argue that specific griefs are “acceptably mourned” because they “include access to political, economic, and cultural privilege; alignment with whiteness and the nation” (362). Because the melancholia displayed in Bridgers’ music can be understood through these national ideals it becomes palatable. “Listening felt so bad and so good,” Jamison writes about her favorite artists, all white women: “Those songs gave me scars to try on like costumes . . . I wanted to be killed and resurrected.” The act of experiencing these women’s grief, playing dress-up with their scars, is alluring—a source of resurrection through pain and death. Because of the appeal of their specific types of pain, societal pressures in demanding emotional labor from white women persists.

However, Bridgers’ melancholia is desirable to society as a whole, not just the white-only spectators of the karaoke bar. People of color remain attracted to the pain of white women even though, as Han and Eng claim, they will never be able to attain it. In a *TikTok* from September 2020, user @godbamit, a Black man, professes, “I don’t know why I relate with sad white women so much, but Phoebe Bridgers, if you’re seeing this, you leave me alone” (bam [@godbamit]). His voice trembles into performed desperation, camera shaking violently until his face blurs. Maybe, like Jamison says, it’s through pain that we’re best able to “try on” the “costumes” of others. After all, it’s Bridgers’ performances of melancholia that hollow her songs into ghosts, as if inviting others to fill in translucent spaces with their own identity. Maybe, by putting on Bridgers’ melancholia, people of color can momentarily experience the ideal of white skin as their own, able to indulge in pain that is prettier, more perfect—pain that can be enjoyed as a luxury rather than suffered as a punishment. As the face of @godbamit blurs into obscurity, we can almost imagine his own identity and melancholia melting for a second as he comes into contact with the lost ideal of whiteness.

As Bridgers mourns, we all mourn. As society pushes Bridgers and other white women into artistic melancholia, she broadcasts her pains back, prompting us to grieve with her, to grieve her. We all—white and non-white alike, woman and non-woman alike—are caught up in a collective cycle of mourning the beautified pain of white women, entering a feedback loop where we ask her to show us her wounds so we can forget ours; when she shows them to us, we only ache more. We're haunted by Bridgers' phantoms, "with the same three songs over and over," she sings in "Chinese Satellite." "I wish I wrote it, but I didn't so I learn the words," Bridgers continues, "Hum along 'til the feeling's gone forever."

NOTE

1. All quotes or references to lyrics come from *Genius* (genius.com); all references to music videos come from Phoebe Bridgers on *YouTube* (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCh4PO1W9tVmHujIPZnfK8TQ>).

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