



Cvetkovich, Ann. 2012.
Depression: A Public Feeling.
Durham: Duke University Press.

Book review by Whitney Stark

Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling*, as the author describes, is part of a larger movement of Public Feelings projects, of which Cvetkovich has directly and indirectly been part. The author discusses Public Feelings work as part of the affective movement, but chooses the more open term of 'feelings' instead of 'affect'. By affect being part of 'feelings', it fits into a broader community of the physical, mental and emotional, acknowledging that affect may be enabled by both social and biological situatedness, which may prove an important alliance with the feminist new materialist movement. These projects work to discuss the sociopolitical, historically situated contextualisations of feelings-as-phenomena in order to work with them not (only) in medicalised understandings. While Cvetkovich acknowledges that medicalisation and pharmaceuticals may work for some, the author also recognises that they are embedded in industries and politics, and believes in nuanced and more multiple approaches. Cvetkovich discusses how medicalised models advocate correcting or healing feelings like depression, relying on an overly simplistic separation of good vs. bad feelings.

Cvetkovich understands depression as a standstill, as not being able to operate as expected whether in the academic job market, battling racism, or trying to succeed in everyday life as a migrant. Framing depression as this standstill is part of the general task of de-pathologisation. With the help of queer nihilisms, Cvetkovich argues that this rest, though it can be frustrating and deemed bad or not productive in capitalist terms of production, need not be understood as such. This book explores depression as the way that capitalism can make everyone, including those with many privileges, become politically paralysed; or, the system



has impossible standards and modes of operation that are not only frequently unattainable, but are also oppressive, and thus set up a model of compliance maintained through making people feel bad about themselves. While the analysis offered in this book may be narrow and the product of this creative book-as-archive has serious shortcomings, some of which I will address later, the author does discuss the important concept of political depression. This loosely means that political situations (such as the changing effects of activist strategies, the slowness of change, the insidious expansion of capitalism, co-option, the perpetuation of racism, classism, etc.) are also part of what enables what we understand today as depression. It aims to find new strategies for not only working *with* depression (that is, not devaluing it by calling it bad or unproductive), but also to recognise what gets labeled as depression as valuable toward creating new and transformative possibilities for anti-oppressive social change.

The book, constructed in two parts, is an effort to set up a personalised archive of depression (part of projects from her previous publication, *An Archive of Feelings*). The first part, 'The Depression Journals: A Memoir', is Cvetkovich's memoir writing used as research. This is done acknowledging and breaking down the bias of academic standards, paying homage to the 'personal is political' feminist uses of memoir, while also critiquing how the new wave of pharmaceutical pop memoir has been used to perpetuate the medicalisation of depression. This research methodology is used in what Cvetkovich understands as the creative strategy needed to interpret the kind of political depression which does not fit with and cannot be articulated by legitimised medical and academic methods, generally constructed with a Western, straight, able-bodied, white male as norm. Cvetkovich discusses her own affective and bodily experiences of depression while trying to succeed in publishing and academic worlds, as well as her father's experience with depression, the feeling that biological heredity was not an adequate descriptor, her own experience with anti-depressants, and routine activity as a way of moving out of depression. In this section, she discusses how her own depression is passed from her father, not necessarily genetically, but through the trials of migration, displacement and the unachievable goals of capitalist success.

The second part of the book, 'A Public Feelings Project: A Speculative Essay', has three chapters which connect the contemporary medicalised understanding of depression with differing experiences of what is understood as such.

In the first chapter, Cvetkovich discusses early Christian understandings of *acedia*, how it was secularised into ‘melancholy’, into psychoanalytical models and into the contemporary understanding of depression. This is done in an effort to counter the conception that depression has always been around yet not diagnosed. By bringing in this earlier Christian understanding of the contemporary diagnosis of depression, Cvetkovich hopes to debunk this myth and situate the diagnosis into a phenomenological understanding, acknowledging that even in its Western and Christian roots (though not explicitly named as such) ‘depression’ also has bodily, spiritual and social connections. It is here the author discusses how medicalisation has strong historical and contemporary ties with secularisation and masculinist efforts to feminise, personalise and thus delegitimise feelings. So, when attempting to nuance the capitalist medical industrial system, it is also important to tackle the ways in which differing forms of spirituality are implicated as illegitimate. Cvetkovich asks, quite importantly and in line with the diasporic and indigenous struggles she later mentions: What would happen if spirituality was taken seriously?

While the discussion of *acedia* and the secularisation of Christian spirituality is helpful and important, this chapter, in the larger project of a book which promises to discuss racist and colonial legacies, has its own set of implications. Cvetkovich fails to acknowledge that much of the oppressive secularisation of spirituality comes in colonisation, imperialism and the creation of ‘primitive’ vs. (Western) culture and witchcraft vs. (Western) science. Relying on discussions of Christianity’s *acedia* to invigorate spirituality is in line with new materialisms, affect and feminist embodiment, but the discussion of indigenous and diasporic spiritualisms seems to be anecdotally referenced or pushed to a section in the next chapter, which, quite frankly, is the ‘people of colour chapter’. The same unexplored mention also happens when she discusses the need to contextualise her own and other white references’ experience of home, settlement and displacement in racism. The second chapter of this section promises to discuss indigenous spiritualities and responses to genocide, colonialism and diaspora. Cvetkovich mostly lists an encyclopedia of several important concepts by people of colour, including Cornel West’s understanding of ‘black sadness’, David Eng and Shin Hee Han’s understanding of the productivity of racial melancholy, and critiques multicultural therapy models that aim at the inclusion of people of color into white-formed di-

agnostic and healing models. She discusses Saidiya Hartman's 'political depression' and Jacqui Alexander's 'radical self-possession' and the sacred, their less 'academic' methodologies and their intersectional analysis of depression in terms of dispossession. This is placed with historical and science fiction writers of color dealing with the absence of an archive on slavery, which forms a sort of depression or standstill that must be worked with in creative ways not privy to academic standards of legitimisation. These are invaluable works in setting up this archive of depression.

Cvetkovich then uses those ideas as a framework to discuss white writers whose work lacks a racial analysis. What I imagine Cvetkovich does not recognise is that in building her creative archive, she follows a pretty old structure: she sandwiches the work of people of colour with that of white people, employing them in order to justify the latter's work, which lacks racial analysis. In this section, the first chapter is about Christianity and the third is about the work of white craft artists and their reclamation of (white) 70s feminisms, not referencing any other sort of craft or textile art by people of colour or with less Western context. Even in this chapter, the work of people of color is used in order to have a closing discussion with and justify white work that has fairly intersectional, but not racialised analysis.

Cvetkovich says several times that legacies of racism and colonialism produce white folks' depression, however the discussion lacks a cohesive recognition. It seems more to be anecdotal and perhaps justifying. Much of the writing when discussing white folks' work excuses this by saying 'although' they ignore these factors, they still do something important that can be allied with anti-racist struggles, even if they aren't actually active allies, because race is still always implicated. While of course it is and it is important to make alliances between differing struggles, the way these strategies pan out is questionable. Something that exemplifies the insidious and underlying racism would be the discussion of Allyson Mitchell's 'Ladies Sasquatch', a fat feminist activist artwork with queer and erotic depiction referencing what has been considered monstrous (women, fat people, people of colour, differently abled people, etc.), on page 185 in which Cvetkovich states: 'their luscious asses are unapologetically big and ask to be touched'. Not only does this concentration and sexualisation of large 'asses' entail traces in eugenicist sciences and the exhibiting of Saartjie Baartman, but also victim blames that

those with 'large asses' (this legacy implicates mostly women of colour) are asking to be groped. This reiterates racist colonial legacies justifying bodily, ideological and social dominance over women of colour.

It is quite possible that this book review could be understood by Cvetkovich as the kind of paranoid rather than affirmative reading that Cvetkovich hopes to avoid. Perhaps this is also true, but would it be 'bad'? It seems, in this book, that a good deal of the affirmative reading strategy is used to de-politicise the implications of privileges. These bits can be used, but affirmative reading and building alliance does not mean that you have to gloss over those violent aspects because there is also good. The affective relation of this justification taints the inception of this archive and makes it less alternative than would be desired for the project of making less oppressive archives by utilising feelings as thematic, central and methodological practice. I am sure some reason why this turned out this way has to do with, as Cvetkovich and many of the writers referenced discuss, academic models are not adequate for radical, transformative, coalitional and creative projects. It is a political depression to try and do these projects within the standards of what allows 'legitimacy' (publishing houses, academia). The project to add alternatives to the archives and connections of what is called depression is incredibly important to the differing ways that medical complexes, capitalism, imperialism and other forms are embedded and racialised in our ways of life. And it is quite obvious that Cvetkovich is not attempting any sort of complete archive or that she feels such a thing is possible. But when working toward anti-oppression, it is also important to recognise the intersecting ways oppression works, even with the best and most radical intentions.