ANN CVETKOVICH (2012) *DEPRESSION: A PUBLIC FEELING*. DURHAM AND LONDON: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5238-9.

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In December 2010 Ann Cvetkovich delivered the final keynote at the *Affecting Feminisms* conference held at Newcastle University. She talked through ideas she was working on for a new book that would include spirituality and sacredness, affect and the depressed body, swimming and yoga, all oriented towards understanding daily habit and creativity as a corrective to antagonistic scenes of politics. She positioned such felt practices somewhere between left melancholy and what Feel Tank Chicago back in May 2003 coined political depression.

Later that evening, after her talk, I saw her walking down the city's high street. She wore a colourful outfit, her back erect, bag slung over her shoulder, perhaps looking for the train station on her way to catch a flight (but where was her suitcase?) or merely getting some air, seeking space from the claims of conferencing that demands so much of those who are introspective and need time to re-centre, before the final evening meal. I wanted to go talk to her, to express my thanks for her keynote and her earlier comments on my paper, to aid her in some way, orient her to the city, soften that strict upstanding spine. But I didn't, guessing that she, like I, was seeking respite in the anonymous crowd; guessing that all my prejudgements on what she was feeling were wrong. I comforted myself with the knowledge that her new book *Depression: A Public Feeling* would be out soon. I hoped it would provide more of the wilful leadership that Cvetkovich had shown at the conference to bring the spiritual into academic talk/life/desire; to argue that yoga, and crafting, free-writing or running, could be suitable subjects for cultural studies and a critical theory that neither abandoned politics nor gave up entirely on the social; that paying attention to affect did not instigate a too-narrow focus on embodiment or "worlding," as Kathleen Stewart names it (2011: 445). Such criticisms have

been levelled by some cultural theorists, with their boots firmly planted still in the representational, towards those such as Cvetkovich who have turned to affect, mindfulness, phenomenology and more-than-representational theories to ask questions such as "how does capitalism feel?" (4); towards those who have exposed how power is not elided in paying attention to the body in its everyday contexts and complications, but is in fact *only* comprehended when situated in the soma; like a tension in the back that is also a posture to hold off interrogation or violence, perhaps.

Academics, of course, are people (most of them). Cvetkovich's book is a human work with its fragilities on show. Its aim is to write what depression might feel like, and to use that exploration to view depression as a social and cultural phenomenon, not a biological or medical one. Following Elizabeth Wilson's work on neurology, Cvetkovich offers a corrective to forms of social construction that dismiss biology, making room for a "gut feminism" – 'not an either/or choice between body and mind, medicine and politics, biology and culture, nature and nurture' (104). However, there is a missed opportunity to link depression to power and the technologies of neoliberalism, to the post-Fordist ideal and the Fordist collapse of the 1960s rooted in the Depression of the 1930s—which would seem an obvious link to make, at such a time as this, in a text written from within austerity and a worldwide economic downturn. Cvetkovich certainly critiques capitalism, but it is others, such as Earl Gammon, who makes of the psychogenesis of neoliberalism an "affective technology" (2013: 515) or Dierdra Reber writing in *Differences,* who critiques rational epistemology and economic growth as a "headless capitalism" (2012: 62), who move closer to the subject of the crisis of what Butler calls "precarious life" (2004: 134) than is achieved in Cvetkovich's book. Of course neither Gammon nor Reber could make those arguments without the foundations laid by Cvetkovich, Lauren Berlant, Stewart, Brian Massumi, Leo Bersani, Jonathan Flatley, Eve Sedgwick, and many others working in the field of affect over the past two decades. Yet for some reason(s) Cvetkovich's study of depression as a "public feeling" does not quite enact the spirited counter-mood that she left us all with at the end of the conference in 2010.

Why is that? It has something to do here with Cvetkovich's inclusion of around fifty pages of a depression journal, which makes up the second part of a book split into what she calls a diptych. A critical introduction allows Cvetkovich to ask questions of how "feeling bad might, in fact, be the ground for transformation" (3) and, again, as she has done so powerfully

for the last decade and more, she makes the case for affect as the subject of political critique, especially for the renewal of something that looks, feels and works like academic activism. For Cvetkovich, "attention to affective politics is a way of trying to come to terms with disappointment, failure, and the slowness of change […] Public Feelings is about rethinking activisms in ways that attend to its emotional registers, including the frustrations that come from trying to keep activism and scholarship together" (7). There is no fault found with going over the tenets of the Public Feelings project as it has been theorized and renegotiated since its inception—Public Feelings as a term used to, as Cvetkovich and Pellegrini put it back in 2003, explore "the range of ways in which feelings are central to public life" (2003: 1). And on the subject of what Cvetkovich and also Berlant especially, in *Cruel Optimism*, term impasses ("a time of dithering adaptation from which someone or some situation cannot move forward" (2011: 4). Cvetkovich is particularly good in depathologizing depression and exposing it as a cultural problem, rather than have it emanate from the internal world of the subject fixable by pharmacological or therapeutic interventions. She does this through a focus on the personal practice of creativity, and this is the strongest part of the book—how exploring depression as an impasse to creative life also identifies creative living as a response to the impasse of depression:

> creativity can be thought of as a form of movement, movement that manoeuvres the mind inside or around an impasse, even if that movement sometimes seems backward or like a form of retreat. Spatialized in this way, creativity can describe forms of agency that take the form of literal movements and are thus more e-motional or sensational or tactile. (21)

Some of the work on exploring how feeling bad can be transformative has of course been done, by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands on melancholia and environmental resistance (2010), Sara Ahmed on unhappiness (2010) and Sianne Ngai on a range of ugly feelings (2005). But only a little is added to those works here, as the thread of creativity remains unwoven as a theory before the book ends, too soon.

The problem perhaps, as other reviewers such as Kate Zambreno (2013) have noted, is that Cvetkovich's literal movements in the text are academically circular, at some times feeling like neither progress nor retreat. She sets out "to write about depression in a way that simultaneously captures how it feels and provides an analysis of why and how its feelings are

produced by social forces" (14) and perhaps this is what holds back the book's breathing. This is the structural affectivity of the book, its epistemological configuration: that depression does not allow one to engage fully with the scenes of one's own desire until it is too often—for *this* question, *that* opportunity—too late. Perhaps that is what is melancholic about my reading of this text. I am holding on to the lost object I'd hoped for, the missed chance of a thought so radical as to affect change in the world. That would certainly be my experience of depressive moods within writing and academic work, leaning on what Jonathan Flatley, following Heidegger, refers to as the "*Stimmung*" of academia, a kind of affective atmosphere "in which intentions are formed, projects pursued, and particular affects can attach to particular objects" (2008: 19). Many in the academic world, including myself, welcome Cvetkovich's focus on the moods, depressions and cruelties of academia, where "academics too often struggle with long-term projects such as dissertations and books while squeezed on the one hand by an intensely competitive job market and meritocratic promotion and reward system and driven on the other by a commitment to social justice that often leaves us feeling like we're never doing enough to make a difference" (19). Her motivation to write a memoir of depression as part of a research method, to be "honest" (80) and to affirm a "commitment to creativity" (22) are well placed in our beleaguered cultural studies.

And yet Cvetkovich expends too much of the energy a depressed person might still have to "have a life" (Berlant, 2011: 3) in defending the inclusion of her depression memoir against potential criticism. For example, she puts up her mitts, so to speak, defending her writing style as not being polished (77) where it is not a question of polish but of the ability for others to bring their own reflection, critique, forms of inquiry, and quality of thought to that memoir as critical material. As Beth Kephart (2013) puts it in an essay on memoir, the form needs to tell you more than the story; it needs to avoid the temptation "to allow that let-me-tell-my-story instinct to rule." Memoir writing is a craft that takes practice and a skill of attunement to literary narration, whereas the academic's work, as epitomised perhaps by Stewart's blend of theory, ethnography and creative sensuality in *Ordinary Affects*, works on a different register, a key that Cvetkovich often reaches in her own critical archive, particularly in her theoretical positioning. But as Zambreno suggests, Cvetkovich would have done well to let the memoir stand alone, rather than defend its inclusion, which erases the opportunity for engaging with the text on one's own terms. And while Cvetkovich invokes,

gestures towards, suggests a deep questioning of what it would mean "to take spirituality seriously in academic scholarship" (198) and to put forward one's own "practices of everyday life as subject for academic scrutiny" (198-199) these invocations come perilously late in the book, as if she is only just getting warmed up. So she *invokes* but she does not *engage* because she has spent too long defending the ideas as grounded in her depression before actually exploring them; it seems almost that fear got the better of her, snuck up on her while she was fighting off the noonday demon, with her head under water, and not waving, as Stevie Smith might say.

Cvetkovich also suffers, perhaps, from my expectations of what this set of Public Feelings scholars offer me through their writing—hope, optimism, a renewed understanding of possibility, and love—for my sense of what academic work can do in the world. Singularly and as a collective they offer change not only in the academic arena but in a world that offers little respite when one has come to see the trajectories of life, for human and nonhuman others, laid out for us by neoliberalism. After reading Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* I fell into my own depression for around a month. But then, later, I grew stronger because of this engagement. This is what Berlant, Cvetkovich, Stewart and others offer: a way out of the current impasses, even if, at first, it hurts. What I wanted from Cvetkovich's book, perhaps, was the courage to go and speak to her when I had the chance, when I saw her walking down the high street; and yet such a banal, ordinary act felt so painful, so impossible, in the scene of routinized and impassive living, within academic hierarchies. Perhaps her book was never going to give me that.

I have no interest as a reviewer, and certainly none as another human being who has already got so much from Cvetkovich, of clawing down her personal memoir as if there were some curtain that needed to fall silently on a second act that did not live up to the promising opening scene, with the hope that a theoretical finale will save the show. If the question is what can Cvetkovich's work help us do in rethinking theory and practices of living to engage in political solidarity that effects positive social change for more humans and nonhumans, then the answer, remains, plenty. Her work on *acedia* and political trauma, particularly from within the archives of queer, lesbian and coloured lives, remains astute and powerful. For studies of creativity, crafting, art, and critical animal studies, her work is important in that, as she notes, those fields "are inventing different ways of being more 'in the body' and less in the head" that are not simply first steps towards a political change

somewhere beyond their acts, but are already "forms of self-transformation, although it can also be a way to build the spiritual warrior self necessary for doing other kinds of work in the world, including organised political activism" (168). Cvetkovich's work is exemplary in offering thought in this area, in being open to spirituality and sacredness, to the self as warrior, especially for the academic in stretch-yoga gear for the trials of intellectual labour. Cvetkovich's book offers most of all a focus on the "utopia of ordinary habit" (191) as a form of creative resistance, which "reconceives the rational sovereign subject as a sensory being who crafts a self through process and through porous boundaries between self and other, and between the human and the nonhuman (including animals and things)" (191). And this utopia of course includes writing. If *Depression* is worth reading and thinking through, and it is, it is because it implores us all to keep writing, to keep "pursuing one's own ways of thinking and being" (22) because to seek "new ways to describe feelings—or the intersections of mind and body that encompass not just more cognitive forms of emotion but the embodied senses" (24) is not simply to write for the sake of it, but to find "a cultural analysis that can adequately represent depression as a historical category, a felt experience, and a point of entry into discussions not only about theory and contemporary culture but about how to live" (23).

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