
Queering Melancholia

IRENE JAVORS

Depression: A Public Feeling

by Ann Cvetkovich

Duke University Press. 296 pages, \$23.95

IN *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Ann Cvetkovich attempts to find different ways of writing and thinking about depression. The book is divided into two parts. The first part, “The Depression Journals (A Memoir),” describes her own experiences of depression while doing her dissertation, writing her first book, and dealing with feelings of political despair. In the second part, “A Public Feelings Project (A Speculative Essay),” she takes insights gained while coping with her own experience to develop three essays about depression as a subject for critical analysis. “This book began from a simple premise,” she states: “that depression should be viewed as a social and cultural phenomenon, not a medical or biological one.”

Cvetkovich, who teaches English and gender studies at the University of Texas, takes depression out of the realm of a diagnostic medical category and into a wider historical perspective, pondering how society gives names and categories to private feelings. Along the way she assembles what she calls her “archive of depression,” including accounts of desert monks who, when suffering from *acedia* (carelessness, inability to find meaning in what one is doing, undergoing a spiritual crisis), are unable to pray or find solace in their calling. Among the traumatic histories she explores are the victims of slavery, genocide, colonialism, and violence against women; sexual minorities; the materially impoverished—in short, all the people that Marx regarded as the lumpenproletariat, “the wretched of the earth.”

Turning to our own time, Cvetkovich maintains that our over-reliance on medication to treat depression is founded on the belief that “biology relieves people of individual blame or responsibility and makes for a tangible set of solutions that contrast with the overwhelming, diffuse, and messy tendencies of social and cultural analysis.” She challenges us to look instead at the social conditions that contribute to the epidemic of depression in our own time, including the economic infrastructure that governs our lives: “depression can be seen as a category that manages and medicalizes the affects associated with keeping up with corporate culture and the market economy, or with being completely neglected by it.” In our work-obsessed, product-driven, capitalist society, depression can also be a form of protest, a withdrawal from consumerism and materialism.

In the final two essays, Cvetkovich offers some interesting alternatives to relieving depression and explores ways that people can survive in a depressive culture without reliance on drugs. Among these are yoga, journal writing, and “lesbian feminist practices of crafting (knitting, quilting—activities that value the art of making something for yourself/others and not

depending on mass produced products).” She also argues that embracing ordinary life as something sacred and extraordinary can be a key to relieving one’s feelings of despair as well as a way to recharge one’s commitment to activism and transformation, both personal and societal.

Depression is a scholarly treatise that makes full use of the concepts and jargon of postmodern thought in general and queer theory in particular, and many readers may find it rough going. The book’s merit is in jolting us out of our habit of thinking about depression as a personal, medical issue, reminding us of the ways in which the rules and roles of society influence our psyches and feelings about ourselves. By taking depression out of the exclusive domain of therapeutic culture, she challenges us to make new connections between the individual’s experience of depression and life within a depressive culture.

Irene Javors, a psychotherapist based in New York, is the author of Culture Notes: Essays on Sane Living.

Does Israel ‘Pinkwash’?

YOAV SIVAN

Israel/Palestine and the Queer International

by Sarah Schulman

Duke University Press. 208 pages, \$22.95

SARAH SCHULMAN’S new book, *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*, is a triple cause of delight for me. Schulman is a renowned Jewish-American lesbian activist who describes here her visit to Israel and entry “into a relationship with Palestine.” I am a gay Israeli living in the U.S.—in fact in New York (attending graduate school), the city that Sarah Schulman has called home for her entire life.

Her new interest began with a twist. A professor at the College of Staten Island of CUNY, Schulman was invited to deliver a keynote speech at Israel’s GLBT studies conference at Tel Aviv University in spring 2010. While not actively involved in Israeli-Palestinian issues before, she decided to turn down the invitation to honor a Palestinian call for a boycott on Israeli institutions. But the invitation prompted her to travel to Israel privately.

Schulman spends the first half the book talking about her “solidarity visit”—by which she means solidarity with both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, especially GLBT people among both. She also had a more specific goal: to commit the Palestinian organizers of the boycott to the GLBT agenda: “If people like me are going to turn our backs on queer events in support of the boycott, then we must be assured that the boycott both recognizes queer support and acknowledges Palestinian GLBT organizing.” To Schulman’s credit, she clarifies: “I am occupying a very tiny zone in between many worlds, none of which I know anything about.”

Schulman provides a detailed account of the preparations for her trip: reaching out to like-minded Israelis and Palestinians; educating herself about Israel by watching alternative