Feminist Theory
http://fty.sagepub.com/

Depression is ordinary: Public feelings and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*

Ann Cvetkovich

Feminist Theory 2012 13: 131
DOI: 10.1177/1464700112442641

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://fty.sagepub.com/content/13/2/131

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *Feminist Theory* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://fty.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://fty.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://fty.sagepub.com/content/13/2/131.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Aug 21, 2012

What is This?

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

Article

Feminist Theory
13(2) 131–146
© The Author(s) 2012
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1464700112442641
fty.sagepub.com

Depression is ordinary: Public feelings and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*

Ann Cvetkovich
University of Texas at Austin, USA

Abstract
What if depression, in the Americas at least, could be traced to histories of colonialism, genocide, slavery, exclusion, and everyday segregation and isolation that haunt all of our lives, rather than to biochemical imbalances? This article seeks alternatives to the medical model found in most depression memoirs by considering how the epistemological and methodological struggles faced by a scholar of the African diaspora confronted by the absent archive of slavery are relevant to discussions of political depression. Combining scholarly investigation and personal memoir, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* exemplifies feminism's affective turn not only by bringing personal narrative into scholarship, but by seeking reparation for the past in the affective dynamics of cultural memory rather than in legal reform or state recognition. Stubbornly refusing to find solace in an African past before slavery, though, Hartman provides a model of emotional reparation in which feelings of loss and alienation persist. Her work suggests the relevance of political depression to both the ordinary life of racism and to what gets called clinical depression.

Keywords
affect, affective turn, archives, depression, feminism, melancholy, ordinary, public feelings, racism, slavery

Introduction: Racism, depression, and feminism's affective turn

> But if whites experienced black sadness . . . (*Pause*.)
> It would be too overwhelming for them. (*Pause*.)
> Very few white people could

Corresponding author:
Ann Cvetkovich, Department of English, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712, USA
Email: cvet@mail.utexas.edu

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

> actually take seriously,
> black sadness and the lives that
> they livin:
> livin' in denial
> 'Oh it couldn't be that bad'
> And they have their own form of sadness
> Tends to be linked to
> the American Dream
> But it's a very very very different kind of
> Sadness.
> (Cornel West in Smith, 2003:108)

What if depression, in the Americas at least, could be traced to histories of colonialism, genocide, slavery, exclusion, and everyday segregation and isolation that haunt all of our lives, rather than to biochemical imbalances? This article takes that premise seriously, but in so doing has to depart from much of the literature on depression, both medical and historical, which, often without acknowledging it directly, tends to presume a white and middle-class subject for whom feeling bad is frequently a mystery because it does not seem to fit a life in which privilege and comfort make things seem fine on the surface. Although for those whose troubles are more obvious, depression might be expected, they are not often the direct subjects of the books and articles in the mainstream press. To track their experiences, we might have to follow the textual traces that include the quotation above, in which Cornel West, as performed by Anna Deavere Smith in the stage version of *Twilight: Los Angeles*, invokes in an almost offhand, but nonetheless chilling, way an emotional colour line that separates black sadness from white sadness. In the space of a few sentences, he opens up the chasm of (mis)understanding that would make any white person humble about presuming to understand black sadness, and he offers, almost in passing, a beautiful diagnosis of white depression as a cultural rather than medical predicament. By linking it to the failure of the American dream, he suggests that sadness comes when the belief that one should be happy or protected turns out to be wrong and a privileged form of hopefulness that has so often been entirely foreclosed for black people is punctured.

My interest in the links between racism and depression is part of a larger project that thinks about depression as a cultural and social phenomenon rather than a medical one (Cvetkovich, 2012). That inquiry has emerged from my collective work over the last decade with Public Feelings, a group of scholars interested in exploring everyday feelings as an entry point on to political life. Central to the work of Public Feelings has been the concept of political depression developed by Chicago's Feel Tank, inspired not only by the politics of the Bush presidency and 9/11, but by AIDS activist burnout and the long-term backlash against social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including feminism.[1] The Public Feelings project asks how the systemic forces of capitalism, racism, and sexism make us feel, and it is curious to

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

work with despair, burnout, hopelessness, and depression rather than dismissing these ostensibly negative affects as debilitating liabilities or shameful failures.

The Public Feelings project can be seen as one form of what is being called the affective turn in cultural criticism, which has not only made emotions, feelings, and affect (and their differences) the object of scholarly inquiry but also inspired new ways of doing criticism (Clough, 2007; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). One reason why the affective turn does not seem particularly new to me is because the Public Feelings project represents the outcome of many years of engagement with the shifting fortunes of the feminist mantra that 'the personal is the political', as it has shaped theoretical and political practices and their relation to everyday life. Many of our members are part of a generation that was schooled in the feminist theory of the 1980s, which emerged in universities that were no longer connected to a strong movement-based feminism and hence was more focused on specifically academic questions and institutional change. Moreover, we were taught to be suspicious of essentialisms, including those associated with affect, such as the idea that women are naturally more emotional than men or that emotional expression is inevitably liberatory. Feelings were nevertheless at the heart of this theoretically informed scholarship, including projects on emotional genres, such as the gothic, the sentimental, the sensational, and the melodramatic, and sophisticated accounts of the history of emotions, the relation between private and public spheres, and the construction of interiority, subjectivity, embodiment, and intimate life.[2] Feminist cultural critique was also careful to scrutinise overly simplistic models of gender identity and the way that the privileges of class, race, or other categories complicate personalist stories of oppression or require that they be carefully situated. At the same time, the personal voice has persisted as an important part of feminist scholarship, enabled, if not also encouraged, by theory's demand that intellectual claims be grounded in necessarily partial and local positionalities. The Public Feelings project builds on these lessons and strategies in an effort to bring emotional sensibilities to bear on intellectual projects and to continue to think about how these projects can further political ones as well. As we have learned to think both more modestly and more widely about what counts as politics so that it includes, for example, cultural activism, academic institutions, and everyday and domestic life, it has become important to take seriously the institutions where we live (as opposed to always feeling like politics is somewhere else out there) and to include institutional life in our approaches to intellectual problems. At this point, theory and affect are not polarised or at odds with one another, and Public Feelings operates from the conviction that affective investment can be a starting point for theoretical insight and that theoretical insight does not deaden or flatten affective experience or investment.

One origin for the Public Feelings group was discussions begun with the impending twentieth anniversary of the 1982 Barnard conference on sexuality as the occasion for reflection on feminist futures. It seems appropriate that Public Feelings would emerge out of a return to a divisive and emotional moment in feminist sexual politics, one fraught with the question of whether dichotomies between pleasure

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

and danger can be strictly maintained. What remains an important legacy is the presumption that sex-positivity does not necessarily mean nice sex, and that the messiness of queer sexualities and negative feelings has important political implications. This history is an important starting point for thinking about the politics of affect within the longer history of feminism (including the relation between first-wave feminisms and women's popular genres) and its deep-seated wish that emotional expression lead to good politics. The history of the sex wars encourages the development of theoretical and practical tools for understanding internal political conflict and impasse in a variety of contexts, as well as ongoing reconsideration of the relation between personal feelings and public movements.

Some thirty years and more after the publication of formative books such as Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness* (1972) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), it remains important to think about depression as a continuation of the tradition by which women have been associated with madness, as well as to consider how the relation between gender and mental health might be reconstructed (and not just for women but for everyone). Feminism has been central to scholarship in cultural studies that critiques the medical model of depression by exploring the historical and cultural dimensions of clinical diagnoses, the pharmaceutical industry, and the institutions of medical science (Orr, 2006; Martin, 2007; Metzl, 2007). I want to make a case for the value of a different set of cultural resources in generating a racialised understanding of depression, one that uses different vocabularies than those of medicine and most depression memoirs (which follow a medical model even when they challenge it). I have been hearing hints of a different genealogy of depression in writings from the African diaspora by women such as Harriet Jacobs, Nella Larsen, Octavia Butler (1979), and Toni Morrison (1987), as well as scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Jacqui Alexander, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Sharon Holland. Their work chronicles forms of what we might call psychic 'dispossession', certainly one way of thinking about both depression and displacement, as well as imagining what Alexander calls 'radical self-possession', or sovereignty of an emotional kind, might look like (2003: 282). Although I myself have advocated for the connections between racism and trauma, tying the latter concept to the many overt acts of violence associated with histories of slavery and colonialism, a full picture of this history must include racism's connections to more chronic and low-level affects, such as those associated with depression. Both racism and depression are pervasive problems that affect all levels of everyday experience but sometimes in oblique ways that are not overtly visible. As Sharon Holland puts it, 'Racism is ordinary' (2005: 403–423). As such, racism is present, but differently so, for both white people and people of colour – we are all affected by a system of differential access. Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as 'the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death', offering an emphatically materialist understanding of racism's inequities (2007: 28). Can we add emotional life to this definition and consider how emotional debility can be one of the forms of vulnerability that targets people for premature death? Moreover,

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

what are the consequences for white people of living lives of privilege in the vicinity of the violence of racism? The emotional colour line that Cornel West describes can itself be a catalyst for depression on both sides of the divide, including white people's feeling, sometimes unconscious, sometimes not, sometimes resentful, sometimes not, that their forms of sadness are incommensurable with those of the historically disenfranchised, an incommensurability that is lived affectively as alienation and hopelessness, as well as more clinical forms of these feelings, such as depression.

West is only one of many scholars of the African diaspora and critical race theory who have taken up the category of sadness in order to discuss the all too vivid afterlives, including their ghosts, of colonialism, slavery, and genocide. The 'emotional color line' that he draws is not a wholly fixed one, however, if we consider the rich body of scholarship on racial melancholy that draws on Freudian and psychoanalytic paradigms in order to describe the affective life of racialised existence and the psychic impact of racism as a form of loss and trauma.[3] Although it has most often emerged in the context of trauma studies, the relevance of work on racial melancholy to the study of depression is not surprising given that racism spans the spectrum from the catastrophic to the ordinary. This scholarship formulates revisionist theories of melancholy as a productive substitute for the concept of depression, and it also suggests alternative genealogies of melancholy that bring colonialism and race to Western historical lineages. There is, however, considerable debate about the value of melancholy as a category for thinking about race, including the version of the emotional colour line that constructs psychoanalysis as a problematic paradigm because it is Western or individualistic. For some critics, melancholy is associated with an irredeemable negative affect or with a dwelling in the past that remains stuck or refuses to move forward. While for some melancholy is not politically useful because it is too sad, for others it is not sad enough and is critiqued as a sentimental embrace of the past that turns away from the real concerns of the present (although these are both versions of the same problem, a melancholic attachment to the past that prevents movement forward, whether psychic, political, or both). David Eng and Shinhee Han's (2003) work on racial melancholy addresses these reservations by suggesting how melancholy's negativity might in fact be productive and an important corrective to a naïve politics of hope; central to such work is a sense that we might not know what politics is – that a politics of melancholy that operates when tending to feelings means the disruption of politics as usual, a need to slow down in order to see what the feelings might be.[4] As West also puts it, the challenge is to dwell in sadness, to explore its full measure without seeking immediate redemption (or, as he says, using a Christian metaphor, remaining 'Saturday people'), but also without giving up a hopefulness that remains stubbornly faithful for no good reason in the midst of despair (as compared with the more rational promise of optimism, which he argues is a 'deeply secular' concept) (Smith, 2003: 108, 106).

This article is informed by the convergence of psychoanalysis and critical race theory in work on melancholy, but it refrains from using that more specialised

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

terminology in favour of a vernacular vocabulary of 'sadness' that can be put in dialogue with clinical or technical terms such as melancholy and depression in order to expand their meanings and lineages. In West's comments, (black) sadness is a complicated feeling, encompassing despair (but as a starting point not an endpoint), hope, and the 'melancholia shot through with black rage' (Smith, 2003: 108) that is so frequently not heard by a 'morally tone-deaf society' (Smith, 2003: 109), despite its articulation by African Americans, from the singers of spirituals on Frederick Douglass's plantation to Coltrane's extended solos. (And West's invocation of a psychoanalytic vocabulary suggests that he, too, acknowledges a mixed heritage for expressions of cultural sadness, as do his references to white writers such as Chekhov and Dreiser.)

For white people as well as people of colour, it is important to acknowledge this lineage, which makes a very different starting point for a study of depression than histories of Western medicine, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, and pharmacology, or stories of white middle-class women and their anxieties, or literary and psychoanalytic traditions of melancholy. Indeed, pursuing the links between racism and depression is no ordinary research question; it requires unusual tools and imaginative forms of interdisciplinary investigation that ideally would yield not just scholarly insight but new cultural practices and social policies. Questions of interdisciplinary method and expertise are at stake here, and race and ethnic studies and medical anthropology have as much to say as clinical psychology, if not more, about what kinds of therapy and/or social change could 'cure' the psychic fallout of colonialism and slavery across a range of generations and different kinds of people (Kleinman and Good, 1985; Good et al., 2008).

This article attempts to answer that question by considering how the epistemological and methodological struggles faced by a scholar of the African diaspora confronted by the absent archive of slavery are relevant to discussions of political depression. Combining scholarly investigation and personal memoir, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* exemplifies feminism's affective turn not only by bringing personal narrative into scholarship, but by seeking reparation for the past in the affective dynamics of cultural memory rather than in legal reform or state recognition. Stubbornly refusing to find solace in an African past before slavery, though, Hartman provides a model of emotional reparation in which feelings of loss and alienation persist. Her work suggests the relevance of political depression to both the ordinary life of racism and to what gets called clinical depression.

Political depression and the return to Africa

In *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman joins the many writers and scholars who have attempted to bring slavery (and its ghosts) to life again, especially affectively, in order to demonstrate its persistent effect on the present. This is no mere scholarly exercise but one that carries deep personal significance for Hartman, as the

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

descendant of slaves. It is also a history project that has very current political stakes. As she puts it,

> If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery – skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (Hartman, 2007: 6)

Echoing Gilmore's definition of racism as 'vulnerability to premature death', Hartman seeks to understand its status as the 'afterlife of slavery' by exploring the connections between her own family history and a history of slavery that reaches back to Africa. Her research takes her to Ghana, where she explores the traces of the slave trade in sites such as the dungeons on the coast at Elmina, which have become part of a burgeoning industry in slavery tourism promoted by the government. Searching for the vestiges of life before slavery, she also travels inland along the trade routes that lead to the villages from which slaves were first captured, often by other Africans, in the first traumatic stages of the journey that would ultimately take them, if they survived that long, to the Americas.

Lose Your Mother is an unusual piece of scholarship, in which memoir is integral to painstaking archival research and fieldwork, not just an articulation of the personal investments that motivate these methods. Hartman extends the feminist use of memoir as a research method by underscoring the historical and archival value of personal narrative. She must write a 'history of slavery that is a personal story' because one of the only ways she can convey the 'slipperiness and elusiveness' of slavery's so frequently absent archive and address the dilemma of how to 'write a story about an encounter with nothing' is to record her own struggles and failures as a researcher (p. 16). As a story about gaps in the historical record, *Lose Your Mother* sheds light on the gaps in my own efforts to track the relation between depression and the histories of slavery, genocide, and colonialism that lie at the heart of the founding of US culture. I want depression, too, to be considered part of the 'afterlife of slavery', but it can be hard to trace the connections between contemporary everyday feelings and the traumatic violence of the past – they might emerge as ghosts or feelings of hopelessness, rather than as scientific evidence or existing bodies of research or material forms of deprivation. Although it might seem odd to use a memoir about a return to Africa rather than medical and clinical research as a way to write about depression, cultural documents such as Hartman's memoir contain modes of thinking and feelings that do not yet exist in clinical theory and practice.

Lose Your Mother not only puts the category of depression in contact with histories of racism and colonialism but also lends itself to being read as a text of political depression. Hartman's journey to Africa is motivated by despair, by a sense of the failures of both the Civil Rights movement in the United States and

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

the era of decolonisation in Africa and of her own belatedness to those struggles: 'Mine was an age not of dreaming but of disenchantment . . . The dreams that had defined their horizon no longer defined mine. The narrative of liberation had ceased to be a blueprint for the future. The decisive break the revolutionaries had hoped to institute between the past and the present failed' (p. 39). Hartman often represents herself as lonely and inconsolable not only in her quest for a different sense of belonging in Africa but also in her relation to African-American and diasporic identities. An ongoing sense of alienation and disenfranchisement in the US makes her feel like a stranger not only amongst white people but amongst those African Americans who can sustain a hope for home or a dream of return. She is different from the African-American expatriates she meets in Ghana, the generation who came to Africa in the 1960s in the first flush of civil rights and decolonisation in hopes of a better world, as well as from those tourists who look to Africa as a source of ancestors, Afrocentric culture, and welcome continuity with the past.

> What had attracted the émigrés to Ghana was this vision of a new life and the promise of rebirth; what attracted me were the ruins of the old one. They were intent upon constructing a new society; I was intent upon tracing an itinerary of destruction from the coast to the savanna. They went to be healed. I went to excavate a wound . . . My generation was the first that came here with the dungeon as our prime destination, unlike the scores of black tourists who, motivated by Alex Haley's *Roots*, had traveled to Ghana and other parts of West Africa to reclaim their African patrimony. For me, the rupture was the story. (pp. 41–42)

Hartman's marking of her generational and political distance from the era of civil rights and decolonisation suggests that political depression might explain the current explosion of interest in trauma studies and public cultures of memory, including the neo-slave narratives of Toni Morrison and others and scholarship in African-American studies on the archive of slavery. Hartman joins contemporary novelists and scholars in returning to the past to 'excavate a wound', insisting that to do otherwise is to fall prey to a historical amnesia that has consequences for the present. A politics of depression is one in which the 'rupture [is] the story', in which there is no celebratory connection between Africans here and Africans there, and no romance or utopia of a precolonial African past: 'A growing sense of despair and an exhausted political imagination incapable of dreaming of radical change had everything to do with the busloads of black strangers looking to shed tears in a slave fort' (p. 171). Holding fast to feelings of despair and depression, Hartman looks to ward off melancholy attachments to the past or naïve celebrations of Afrocentrism that might be characterised as sentimental. It is a difficult feeling to sustain politically and to articulate publicly; in a television interview with Tavis Smiley (2007), Hartman is at pains to explain what it would mean to insist on the lack of connection to Africa, in response to Smiley's desire for an uplifting story of ancestral recovery. In her unrepentant crankiness, she resists easy therapeutic

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

protocols or reverse migrations that might aim to talk her out of her sense of alienation. One question this article ultimately seeks to ask, however, is whether the distinction Hartman makes between 'healing' and 'excavating a wound' can be rethought, so that they are not mutually exclusive.

In suggesting that *Lose Your Mother* be read as an articulation of political depression, I want to reframe what might otherwise be a too exclusive focus on its efforts to provide affective access to historical trauma. It is certainly the case that some of the text's most powerful moments emerge from its impossible attempts to conjure the experience of slavery, as when Hartman stands in the slave dungeons of Elmina and cannot feel the past adequately, or can do so only as a creepy encounter with dust: she fails to 'reach through time and touch the prisoners': 'the only part of my past that I could put my hands on was the filth from which I recoiled' (pp. 115, 119). Hoping to make up for the absent textual archive by staging a material encounter with history (and another reason for memoir is to document this kind of fieldwork), Hartman has a sensory experience of a different kind than she had imagined as she treads on the compacted layers of skin and shit that line the floors of the dungeon and form an all too material remnant of the past. They are ultimately, however, the scene of a missed encounter since rather than a sense of connection with the slaves who inhabited the space, she feels only a sense of loss.

Hartman's encounter with slavery's textual archive, sometimes the only recourse for recovering the past, is equally unsentimental, as she refuses any sense of easy contact with trauma's shocking realities. In recovering the archival traces of a girl whose death on the slave ship *Recovery* was the subject of a court case that was used as publicity by the British abolitionist Wilberforce, Hartman is critical of the way that the girl's story leads to spectacle (in the form of an illustration of her suspended upside down and naked) rather than felt experience, even in the hands of those who are sympathetic to her plight. Her effort to find a different way to tell the story than Wilberforce, to 'save the girl, not from death or sickness or a tyrant but from oblivion', leads her to fantasise about the possibility of escape and resistance. 'If the story ended there, I could feel a small measure of comfort. I could hold on to this instant of possibility. I could find a salutary lesson in the girl's suffering and pretend a story was enough to save her from oblivion' (pp. 152–153). But Hartman is sceptical of this kind of affective or archival rescue, recognising that 'it was easier to feel fully the loss of one life and to hang your hopes on one girl. Too many deaths were unmanageable' (p. 143).

As vivid as Hartman's versions of them might be, stories of ghosts and absent archives have become increasingly familiar. One of the distinctive contributions of her project is the use of personal narrative to frame archival recovery as motivated by political depression and the accompanying questions this move raises about the broader political work of trauma studies' affective dynamics. Hartman is very stringent about avoiding any self-congratulatory fall into melancholic nostalgia, or a dwelling in the past that is not connected to the present. Central to her affective politics is the vexed relation between her own position as middle-class

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

black intellectual and slavery's past. As she stands in the dungeons of Africa frustrated by her inability to touch the past, Hartman asks:

> Could I trace my despair back to the first generation stolen from their country? Was it why I sometimes felt as weary of America as if I too had landed in what was now South Carolina in 1526 or in Jamestown in 1619? Was it the tug of all the lost mothers and orphaned children? Or was it that each generation felt anew the yoke of a damaged life and the distress of being a native stranger, an eternal alien? (p. 130)

She turns to history as a resource for understanding the despair and weariness (so frequently cited as symptoms of depression) produced by racism and a sense of homelessness. Uncured by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Hartman's political depression leads to a journey to Africa that is an alternative to both politics and therapy, whether pharmaceutical or psychoanalytic. Both geographic and historical, Hartman's journey leads her out of the archive (and the clinic) to the material landscape of Africa but also returns to the archives (and to forms of self-analysis) to explain what she has seen and felt there.

Risking the charges of narcissism or self-indulgence so often levelled against writers of memoir or autoethnography, Hartman links the experiences of the slaves to her own life so as to ask crucial questions about the relation between past and present that keep the history of slavery relevant to contemporary concerns. 'Why else begin an autobiography in a graveyard?' she asks (p. 130), as she wonders what versions of utopia or political futurity might be available to her if they must emerge from the traumatic rupture that is constitutive of African-American identity, rather than the dream of civil rights or decolonisation. Her claim that despair is historically produced is not an easy one, since she finds herself 'fumbling' and a 'failed witness' in her efforts 'to connect the dots between then and now' (p. 129), but Hartman nonetheless opens the way to an important understanding of political depression as a condition in which history shapes even the most personal experience of the present.

In response to the above question about autobiography, Hartman's narrative takes an unexpected swerve from the dungeons of Africa back to the streets of her New York childhood by way of her mother's origins in Montgomery, Alabama. The personal erupts in a surprising and potentially risky way through a story that might seem minor in comparison with the violence of the dungeons. Hartman tells an anecdote about how her mother was stopped by the police after accidentally running a red light on an icy street, and how she, as a twelve-year-old girl, yelled at the cop in a state of indignant rage despite her mother's fear of confrontation. Startled by her angry outburst, the policeman lets her mother go, and she and her mother are so shaken by the incident that they cannot speak of it. It is a story of everyday racism in the US, one that is notable for its ordinariness rather than its spectacularity, and Hartman unpacks it in order to show the complexity of the feelings that have been inherited by a generation brought up in the civil rights era. Explaining how her mother passed on to her, alongside hopes for political change,

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

a dread of white policemen, Hartman exposes the underbelly of dreams of freedom and racial uplift and the emotional unconscious of a world that remains 'ruled by the color line'. Although Hartman's mother is 'an integrationist and a striver', she has nonetheless taught her children 'a set of contradictory lessons' about 'infinite possibilities and absolute limitations', 'spacious skies, amber waves, and niggers hanging from trees' (p. 132). The Catholic school girl with 'two ponytails and ashy knees and a plaid school jumper' (p. 131) who is the recipient of these teachings is poised to respond to a minor traffic incident as though she were about to be lynched in the South or taken into slavery in Africa. This legacy of fear and suspicion even in a respectable black family – an inability to trust white people or a tendency to assume the worst in any encounter with authority – is the everyday affective life of racism that Hartman seeks to capture, along with recounting the dismal statistics on imprisonment and death that are the more visible evidence (to some at least) of ongoing racial inequality.

It might seem dangerously presumptuous to place her own experience alongside that of slaves in the past, and Hartman is wary of how a sentimental identification with slavery – 'the tug of all the lost mothers and orphaned children' – can provide too easy a vehicle for inconsolable grief and suffering. She does not have to reach far, though, to connect the past and present, and immediately after her account of the childhood incident, she mentions Hurricane Katrina's devastations, which forcefully demonstrate her sense that slavery's past has ongoing meaning because of its urgent relation to present-day racism. But Hartman's bolder move is the intrusion of a less overtly violent episode into this account of extreme and very public suffering through her turn to a personal anecdote that is quite ordinary to describe the affective life of racism. She dares to place her own racial despair alongside the gravity of the dungeons so as to avoid a public culture of trauma that focuses on the horrors of the past at the expense of a less dramatic but no less disturbing present. Without this connection to the present, trauma histories can become in their own way an exercise in self-indulgence, a substitution of the melodrama of the past for the everyday weariness of the present.

Reparative feelings

In her vigilant attention to the dark side of Africa's slave-trading past and postcolonial present and to ongoing racism in the US, Hartman might seem likely to refuse the reparative mode central to recent efforts within cultural studies to find alternatives to critique. A crucial touchstone has been Eve Sedgwick's use of theoretical resources from Melanie Klein and Silvan Tomkins, as well as the model of queer aesthetic practices, to describe the process of working creatively with experiences of loss and other negative affects (Sedgwick, 2003). A reparative sensibility can also be found in the work of our Public Feelings colleague Kathleen Stewart, who for many years has been talking about following the surfaces and textures of everyday life rather than exposing the putative realities of underlying structures (Stewart, 1991, 1996, 2007). But Hartman's attention to an affective afterlife of

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

slavery that includes her own subterranean feelings of fear, anger, and hopelessness is also its own form of reparation, a way of acknowledging the value of the ordinary but complex feelings of young girls growing up in the shadows of the still to be achieved dreams of emancipation, decolonisation, and civil rights. The persistence of racism not only in the blatant form of Katrina's disasters but in all too ordinary encounters with the police keeps the violence of slavery's past alive, and by creating an archive of such moments even when the archive of slavery eludes her, Hartman offers her own form of testimony to the power of the past. Even when she fails to reconstruct the felt life of slavery, her efforts to make the connection between past and present provide an affective legacy of political depression that is vital to imagining the future. Hartman's turn to memoir in the context of historical research reveals the emotional labour of reparation.

Moreover, even as she seems persistently suspicious about utopian visions of liberation, Hartman has her own version of a reparative dream.[5] *Lose Your Mother* closes with Hartman's journey from Ghana's coast to the slave routes of the interior, where she is confronted yet again not only by interminable loss but by the spectre of African on African violence that gives the lie to a simple white on black exploitation or a heroically victimised African subject. Part of a research group on slavery and memory that consists largely of African scholars, she feels an increasing sense of isolation as an American of the African diaspora for whom the bitterness of slavery lives on and for whom her colleagues' tales of African resistance and survival provide no solace. But in her commitment to the epistemology of rupture and to irredeemable loss, Hartman finds what she calls 'fugitive dreams':

> If after a year in Ghana I could still call myself an African American, it was because my Africa had its source in the commons created by fugitives and rebels, in the courage of suicidal girls aboard slave ships, and in the efforts, thwarted and realized, of revolutionaries intent upon stopping the clock and instituting a new order, even if it cost them their lives. For me, returning to the source didn't lead to the great courts and to the regalia of kings and queens. The legacy I chose to claim was articulated in the ongoing struggle to escape, stand down, and defeat slavery in all of its myriad forms. It was the fugitive's legacy. (p. 234)

Rather than inspiring ideals of national sovereignty or cultural nationalism's sense of racial kinship across time and space, Hartman's visit to Africa lends itself to a vision of people whose shared history of violence and despair enables them to move forward: 'It was a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood. It was a dream of an elsewhere, with all its promises and dangers, where the stateless might, at last, thrive' (p. 234). In Hartman's version of utopia she does not have to renounce her depressive affect; it can be the source of a transformative vision of how those who are depressed, alienated, lonely, or stateless can make common cause and where utopia includes 'danger' as well as 'promise'. She articulates a politics in which former slaves, conjured through memory despite inadequate archives, become comrades: 'It requires the reconstruction of society, which is the only

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

way to honor our debt to the dead. This is the intimacy of our age with theirs – an unfinished struggle. To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?' (p. 170). Rejecting a politics of reparation that is locked in the past, and rejecting also the image of the slave on his knees supplicating for freedom, Hartman seeks a politics that eschews the sentimental and keeps despair next to hope. She wants to avoid both an interminable sadness that remains fixed in the past and does not make connections to the future, but also a naïve optimism that does not address the past and its violence adequately and that is too easily celebratory.

Hartman's use of her own childhood feelings as part of the archive of slavery's afterlife suggests that the feminist project of understanding the personal as political remains relevant. Not only is her account of political depression important for thinking about racial politics in the aftermath of civil rights and decolonisation, but it is also suggestive for feminist and queer politics that confront ongoing challenges, including internal conflicts between assimilationist and radical positions.[6] The unfinished business of social movements requires patience with feelings of failure and despair that need not necessarily be debilitating. *Lose Your Mother*'s unusual methods of research and writing risk the seemingly incommensurate connections between one's own feelings and public histories and between despair and hope in order to both remember the dead and provide a way forward.

Notes

1. For further background on Public Feelings, see Cvetkovich (2007), Stewart (2007), Carmody and Love (2008), Muñoz (2009), Staiger, Cvetkovich and Reynolds (2010), Berlant (2011), as well as Cvetkovich (2003) and Cvetkovich and Pellegrini (2003). It is hard to imagine the work of Public Feelings without the writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ranging from *Between Men* to *Touching Feeling*, and I would especially like to acknowledge the work of Lauren Berlant and Katie Stewart, which has consistently inspired and shaped my own thinking.
2. Formative work on feminism and women's genres includes Armstrong (1987), Davidson (1985), Radway (1984), Romero (1997), Samuels (1992), Sedgwick (1985), Tompkins (1985), as well as the more recent summary by Davidson and Hatcher (2002). Work in this area by Public Feelings members includes Berlant (1991), Cvetkovich (1992), and especially Berlant (2008) on the 'unfinished business of sentimentality'.
3. This body of work includes: Gordon, 1997; Hartman, 1997; Muñoz, 1999; Holland, 2000; Cheng, 2001; Eng and Han, 2003; Eng and Kazanjian, 2003; Khanna, 2003; Moten, 2003; Gilroy, 2005.
4. Love (2007) is also useful for its discussion of the politics of negative affect, as is Flatley (2008), which considers non-depressive forms of melancholy, including a discussion of W.E.B. DuBois.
5. For Hartman's more explicit discussion of reparation, see Best and Hartman (2005). The longer argument of which this article is a part (Cvetkovich, 2012) explores other modes of reparation in the indigenous spiritualities of Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

(2003) and in depression memoirs that find a reparative relation to land and home without being nationalist or nostalgic.

6. For queer uses of Hartman, see Gopinath (2010) and Halberstam (2011).

References

Alexander J (2003) *Pedagogies of Crossing*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Armstrong N (1987) *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Berlant L (1991) *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Berlant L (2008) *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Berlant L (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Best S and Hartman S (eds) (2005) 'Redress' [Special issue], *Representations* 92(1).

Butler O (1979) *Kindred*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Carmody T and Love HK (2008) 'Try Anything'. *Criticism* 50(1): 133–146.

Cheng A (2001) *The Melancholy of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chesler P (1972) *Women and Madness*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Clough PT (ed.) (2007) *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Cvetkovich A (1992) *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Cvetkovich A (2003) *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Cvetkovich A (2007) 'Public Feelings'. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106(3): 459–468.

Cvetkovich A (2012) *Depression: A Public Feelings Project*. Durham: Duke University Press, in press.

Cvetkovich A and Pellegrini A (eds) (2003) 'Public Sentiments', *Scholar and Feminist Online* 2(1).

Davidson C (1985) *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Davidson C and Hatcher J (eds) (2002) *No More Separate Spheres! A Next Wave American Studies Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Eng D and Han S (2003) 'Dialogue on Racial Melancholia'. In: Eng D and Kazanjian D (eds) *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 343–371.

Eng D and Kazanjian D (eds) (2003) *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Flatley J (2008) *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gilbert SM and Gubar S (1979) *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gilmore RW (2007) *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gilroy P (2005) *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

Good M-JDV, Hyde ST, Pinto S and Good BJ (eds) (2008) *Postcolonial Disorders*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gopinath G (2010) 'Archive, Affect, and the Everyday: Queer Diasporic Re-Visions'. In: Staiger J, Cvetkovich A and Reynolds A (eds) *Political Emotions*. New York: Routledge, pp. 165–192.

Gordon A (1997) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gregg M and Seigworth G (eds) (2010) *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Halberstam J (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hartman SV (1997) *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hartman SV (2007) *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Holland SP (2000) *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Holland SP (2005) 'The Last Word on Racism: New Directions for a Critical Race Theory'. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104(3): 403–423.

Khanna R (2003) *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kleinman A and Good B (1985) *Culture and Depression: Studies in the Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Psychiatry of Affect and Disorder*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Love H (2007) *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Martin E (2007) *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Metzl J (2007) *Prozac on the Couch: Prescribing Gender in the Era of Wonder Drugs*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Morrison T (1987) *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Knopf.

Moten F (2003) *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz JE (1999) *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz JE (2009) 'Between Psychoanalysis and Affect: A Public Feelings Project' [Special issue], *Women and Performance* 19(2).

Orr J (2006) *Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Radway J (1984) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Romero LP (1997) *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Samuels S (ed.) (1992) *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sedgwick EK (1985) *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sedgwick EK (2003) *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012

Tavis Smiley Presents (2007) PBS, 27 January.
Smith AD (2003) *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc.
Staiger J, Cvetkovich A and Reynolds A (eds) (2010) *Political Emotions*. New York: Routledge.
Stewart K (1991) 'On the Politics of Cultural Theory: A Case for ''Contaminated'' Critique'. *Social Research* 58(2): 395–412.
Stewart K (1996) *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an 'Other' America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Stewart K (2007) *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Tompkins JP (1985) *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Downloaded from fty.sagepub.com by guest on August 23, 2012