

EMILY MARTIN. *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. 400, 23 halftones, 6 tables. ISBN-10 0-691-00423-4; ISBN-13 978-0-691-00423-5.

The U.S. anthropologist Emily Martin (New York University) visited the University of Helsinki for a few days in May 2007, and gave a lecture titled *The Pharmaceutical Person* which addressed the new subjectivities that are currently fashioned by the global pharmaceutical industry. This is also a central theme in Martin's engaging interdisciplinary book *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture*, which elucidates the contemporary American affinity with manic states. For the past two decades, Martin has been conducting ethnography on health, technology and science in the United States, focussing on the broad cultural milieu within which science takes place. She has previously worked on women's experiences of reproduction, as well as popular and scientific understandings of the immune system and HIV. According to Martin, *Bipolar Expeditions* is the result of 10 years' effort, and it shows. The book covers a wide array of interrelated topics: mental illness and rationality, subjectivity and personhood, value and power. This combination is the result of a series of "expeditions" on which Martin embarked in order to learn how bipolar disorder, previously known as 'manic depression', is viewed both by people living with the condition, and by American society at large. She attended support group meetings on both the East and the West coasts and took part in the clinical rounds of a large teaching hospital. She also participated in numerous conferences, seminars and training sessions. In addition to fieldwork, her data includes a plenitude of interviews and media representations.

Through this material, *Bipolar Expeditions* examines the paradoxes of manic depression. Martin prefers to use this older term, coined by Emil Kraepelin in the late nineteenth century, which emphasises the interrelatedness of different classes of intense emotions. The visibility of the condition in the media, combined with popular culture's affection for mania, seem puzzling when contrasted with the disadvantages people diagnosed with bipolar disorder face in employment, higher education, and in front of the law. Part I (p. 35-74) of the book looks at "living under the description manic depression" as a social experience rich in ambivalence and uncertainty. Through close depictions of interaction among support group members, and between doctors, medical students and patients, Martin explores the roles that sociality and performativity play in the interpretation of behaviour, calling into question the strict boundary that is commonly drawn between rationality and irrationality. Building on Wittgenstein's notion of intentionality, she argues that within the extensive field of medical authority, disagreement over treatment—a performance of subjectivity by the patient—is read as its opposite, as proof of pathology and non-subjectivity. Medical science strives for universal, context-free categories that refer to objective reality, and appeal to popular imaginations. These standard terms, which she calls "text-atoms", also dominate the language of support group meetings Martin attended. She notes how the term comes from the sociolinguists Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, who point out, "To turn something into a text is to seem to give it a decontextualized structure and meaning, that is, a form and meaning that are imaginable apart from the spatiotemporal and other frames in which they can be said to occur" (p. 136). She further notes how there is a certain power in such "text-atoms" and in their abstract precision as, in support groups people often

encountered, or were deliberately taught, “a new vocabulary for what they were experiencing” (p. 136).

Yet actual social situations tend to include grey areas that are hard to categorise. These ambiguities require interpretation, or repression, by the participants whose racialised or gendered perceptions are not irrelevant. This aspect is demonstrated well by Martin’s captivating examples from clinical rounds, where medical students are taught to diagnose patients. The discussion on rationality becomes even more layered when we learn that the author herself is suffering from bipolar disorder. Martin documents candidly her own experiences of the illness, the cocktails of drugs she takes, and the social complications she has to deal with. This makes *Bipolar Expeditions* deeply personal, as well as insightful.

In Part II (p. 175–), the perspective is switched and Martin explores the meanings of manic depression in such experience-distant contexts as the media, corporations and markets. The two levels of analysis remain quite separate, although there are also points of commonality. Martin discusses in depth the disquieting features of the American cultural fascination with mania, such as the demand for individual self-improvement and the commoditisation of mood. In the media, for example, unpredictable global markets are frequently presented as bipolar, oscillating between highs and lows. In this contemporary landscape, bipolarism has come to be linked with creativity, motivation and productivity: Famous figures like Vincent van Gogh, Benjamin Franklin and Ted Turner are celebrated for their putative manic depression. Over the past 20 years, Martin argues, manic depression has become a useful metaphor for large segments of the American society. At the same time, common norms set for individual moods have shifted from moderate and controlled toward hot and passionate—ideally mania without depression. For people suffering from mood disorders, tracking their moods is a part of therapy. However, more and more people are encouraged to practice mood charting as a non-medical tool for self-monitoring, and commercial mood charts are proliferating quickly. Martin argues convincingly that moods are transforming into thing-like objects that can be measured, compared and manipulated for greater productivity. This highly individualistic construction of mood denies the social dimension of a person’s inner state. According to Martin, these social trends enable the aesthetics and subjectivity of a self-maximising, flexible shapeshifter who survives without the state: “The person now seems to be made up of a collection of assets, as if she were the proprietor of herself as a stock portfolio” (p. 41). This is a construction that leaves little room for traditional citizenship. She takes a strong political stand against neoliberalism and argues that forces promoting free entrepreneurial capitalism have critically distorted the American social fabric. Policies that increase inequality by reducing people’s ability to depend on institutions for support have created an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty that is now finding partial expression in “manic markets”.

Martin’s style of writing is delightfully clear, making her complex arguments easy to follow. *Bipolar Expeditions* brings together insights from psychology, psychiatry and social theory, resulting in an interdisciplinary approach that opens up numerous avenues for further research. Its methodology and ethnographic data are beautifully presented, making the book an admirable example of anthropology of Western societies. Martin is not claiming that mental illness is an invention of society, nor is she anti-drug; rather, she maintains that cultural values profoundly shape a society’s response to different forms of “madness”. She offers an intriguing genealogy of mental illness, pointing out how gender imagery and



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constructions of personhood shift depending on the context. Her analysis also shows how categories of mental illness reflect socio-cultural images of madness as the Other. In the U.S., the social quality of emotion is increasingly ignored, and hot moods are turned into resources or commodities that can be optimized and managed, maybe even exploited. All this in turn shapes peoples' lived experiences, although Martin does not offer a smooth synthesis of perspectives. Nevertheless, the underlying argument of the book is that ultimately, individuals are thinkable only as relational beings.

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