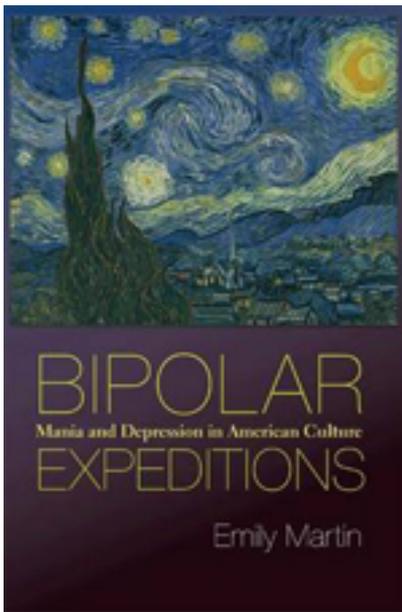


“Empathy and Contagion: a Review of Emily Martin’s *Bipolar Expeditions*”

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Martin, Emily. *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 370 pages. \$45.00 cloth, 22.95 paper.



Emily Martin, in her landmark book *Bipolar Expeditions*, has written what I will call an “empathetic ethnography.” She recounts her own experiences, presents doctors’ diagnostic interviews of patients in front of medical students (which can mimic performances), and analyzes group meetings in which one finds solidarity, but also watchfulness. Throughout the book, she not only employs or incorporates empathy in her analysis, but communicates a version of it to her readers as well.

Martin proceeds from her “doubled position” as both participant and observer, patient and analyst. “In my life, as in this book,” she writes, “I stand in a doubled position as a person who appreciates the benefits of psychopharmacology and other therapies and who is curious about their historical and cultural significance” (xviii). Martin’s “aim is to move toward a social theory of irrationality” (29). What she means by this is expansive; her hope is for “descriptions that allow [people said to have manic depression] to belong fully to the human condition rather than to an outer sphere of ‘irrationality’” (*ibid.*). In writing the book, Martin wishes to reclaim what it means to be “crazy” (xix).

In so doing, we can say that Martin wants to create an empathetic community of readers who experience a “friendly recognition” of the ways in which their world includes both the irrational and irrational. “I would hope that [...] the word ‘crazy’ could come to mark the ways that

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everyone belongs in one way or another—even if only in their dreams—to the realm of the irrational. I am not saying that we are all alike or that some of us are not disabled by our craziness. I am saying that there could be friendly recognition across the sometimes arbitrary line between rational and irrational acts and thoughts” (xix).

An example of what this “friendly recognition” might mean appears in the discussion of personhood, which indicates both the appeal and the difficulty of transforming key aspects of American culture. Martin writes, “A person living under the description of manic depression is a threat to the conception of American personhood that has prevailed for centuries: a person with a central controlling principle based on the will, who is owner of himself and acts out of individual intention and desire toward rational ends” (269). She would like to see the fragmented personhood that results from manic depressions be seen not as a “threat” to the prevailing general notion she describes, but rather as a building block towards a revised theory of the individual, one that would acknowledge that “everyone’s personhood—rational, irrational, or somewhere in between—is less built upon a unitary concept, fragile or not, than made of a dense web of social connections with others” (*ibid.*).

Martin’s mission is complicated additionally by the celebration in popular journalism, and in business ‘how-to-succeed’ writing, of the bipolar “style” (not the condition). On one hand, “American culture today has a strong affinity with manic behavior [...]. People [...] are fascinated by manic behavior and see it as a valuable resource in the ever-accelerating spiral of ‘productivity’” (1). Such popular publications “claim that the emotional contagion of high moods can directly affect business success” (2). However, on the other hand, “extreme states like mania may fascinate and attract us, but they disquiet us as well” (4). *Bipolar Expeditions* demonstrates the difficulty of reconciling the positive and negative aspects of this discourse by showing, through Martin’s creative and wide-ranging fieldwork, the number of places in which representations and diagnoses of manic depression are found. Martin adds the many personal stories she heard in her research to the mix, illustrating how the resulting complexities are lived. Her informants struggle daily to balance their needs for privacy and for community, and to reach an equilibrium between their medications and the particular demands of their everyday lives.

Empathy, like emotional contagion, can spread someone else’s point of view. It can also spread something unsettling, even debilitating. Martin not only empathizes with people living under the diagnosis of bipolar depression, but she successfully communicates her empathy as well. Through persuasion and communication, in the end, the process has begun through which something is passed from one person to others. In short, Martin writes an empathetic ethnography which enables the conclusions she reaches from her “bipolar expeditions” to be contagious.

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France and Italy. Her publications on topics such as aesthetics and modernity, identity, consumer culture, and space and memory include “The Female Aesthetic Community,” “Realism Without a Human Face,” “The Origins of the Specious” and “Bought in Italy.” She is Professor of Anthropology at Vassar College.