What might 'bad feelings' be good for?

Some queer-feminist thoughts on academic activism

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The purpose of this article is to explore how we might understand 'bad feelings' and their place in academic activism. The article begins with a proposition that higher education scholarship reproduces certain habits of thinking about affective practices and their political utility. Often 'strong' feelings such as hope, anger, and frustration are associated with political agency, whereas 'weak' feelings such as depression, numbness and anxiety tend to be written off as political liabilities. This article draws upon queer and feminist debates on affect in order to disrupt these habits of thought. Rather than rushing to pathologise 'bad feelings' as politically useless, this article lingers with them, in order that they might teach us something about the complexity of political practice in the contemporary university. By interrogating affective-political norms, this article hopes to expand the pool of affective resources that may be available for academic activism in the present.

Keywords: activism, affective-politics, depression, queer theory, feminist theory

> It's a search for utopia that doesn't make a simple distinction between good and bad feelings or assume that good politics can only emerge from good feelings; feeling bad might, in fact, be the ground for transformation. (Ann Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 3)

Introduction

This article draws two threads of argument together, one emerging from higher education scholarship on affective-politics and another surfacing from queer and feminist theorisations of negative feeling. I begin the article by considering the ways in which higher education scholarship has tended to code the political utility of emotions. I track two tendencies in existing research: 1) negative feeling is often used to diagnose political problems, and 2) feelings that are interpreted as positive and strong, such as hope and optimism, are often seen as resources with political potential, whereas weak or 'bad' feelings, such as depression, numbness and anxiety, are often written off as political liabilities. The second thread of the article is theoretical: drawing on a wide body of queer and feminist literature on affect I make the case for higher education researchers to defamiliarise ourselves from common sense understandings of what 'bad feelings' can and cannot do. Drawing in detail on Cvetkovich's (2012) study of academic depression, I demonstrate not only the limits of some taken-for-granted affective-political narratives, but also show how bad feelings may open up possible routes of repair and transformation.

Feeling neoliberalism: Affect as a diagnostic tool

This article is animated by a question: why might 'bad feelings' be important when it comes to academic activism? Perhaps the most common way to answer this question is to say that bad feelings matter because they offer critical feedback about what may be occurring in

the political sphere. Observing patterns of emotional suffering across different time periods and among differently positioned constituencies might be used to teach activists things about the impacts of reforms. By this understanding affect is diagnostic, and tracing its distribution can help us to narrate a political scenario. Such a framing moves in the direction of what Margaret Wetherell (2012) calls 'affective practice', which allows for the tracking of clusters of feeling 'across a scene, a site or an institution' (2012, p. 14). Following this logic, we can look to the emotional sphere to examine the kinds of affective subjects that tend to be constituted within particular spaces, places and times.

Such a way of working with affect has become increasingly common in higher education scholarship. Indeed, a large body of work has now emerged which positions higher education climates as uneasy (Smith, Rattray, Peseta & Loads, 2016) and 'on edge' (Kelly, 2015, p. 1158), set as they are within profound changes to the conditions and expectations of academic labour. Neoliberalism, a form of political economy that 'validates and valorises the so-called free market as the primary mechanism for all human exchange and interaction' (Kenway, Boden & Fahey, 2014, p. 261), has resulted in intensified regulation, expanding responsibility, growing surveillance and the precaritisation of academic work. While admittedly these changes are not unlike those in many twenty-first century labour markets, it remains worth considering their specific enactments across particular higher education sectors. There is a growing consensus among Anglophone researchers from the Global North that the combination and intensity of these changes to their institutions has shifted the 'ethico-emotive ground tone' of the university (Zipin, 2010).

The body of work which has explored the affective-political dynamics of the contemporary university is now well established (Barcan, 2013; Burrows, 2012; Bryson, 2004; Court & Kinman, 2008; Cvetkovich, 2012; Davies, 2005; Davies & Petersen, 2005; Ditton, 2009; Gill, 2010; Grant & Elizabeth, 2014; Hey, 2011, 2013; Kelly, 2015; Kenway, Boden & Fahey, 2014; Kinman, 2014; Leathwood & Hey, 2009; Pelias, 2004; Saltmarsh & Randell-Moon, 2014; Sparkes, 2007; Sullivan & Simon, 2014). I do not intend to rehearse the ins and outs of this entire archive of work. Instead, I will pick out several examples that I view as illustrative, beginning with Vivienne Elizabeth and Barbara Grant's (2013) article which considers how neoliberal transformations to the university are felt by individual academics. Elizabeth and Grant (2013) created poetic transcripts from an empirical study with 19 academics to explore how the 'spirit' of the university may have changed. Their poetic texts demonstrate that the impacts of managerialism and the growing emphasis on research productivity reverberate differently for variously positioned academic subjects. Rather than stable and predictable, academics are revealed as 'fragmented and complex' (p. 127) and experiencing a range of 'messy and contradictory' (p. 127) emotional responses to these changes. Yet, there is a clear sense that managerialism 'gets under [the] skin' (p. 123) of academics, 'reshaping how they feel about themselves, sometimes putting them "at odds" with themselves' (p. 123).

This sense of academics being 'at odds' with themselves is also considered by Rosalind Gill (2010) in her chapter 'Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of the neoliberal university'. Gill identifies her aim as 'understanding the relationship between economic and political shifts, transformation to work and psychosocial experiences' and 'how we might resist' (2010, p. 230). She characterises the academic present as replete with bad feelings such as 'exhaustion, stress, overload … anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt' (p. 229) and embodied effects like 'aching backs, tired eyes, difficulties in sleeping' (p. 232). Roger Burrows (2012) follows up Gill's work by arguing that something indeed 'has changed in the UK academy' (p. 355). Burrows agrees that this change has had injurious impacts, 'one can observe it all around; a deep, affective, somatic crisis threatens to overwhelm us' (2012, p. 355). In his search for answers Burrows examines the relationship between 'metrics, markets and affect' (2012, p. 355), arguing that the 'emergence of a particular structure of feeling amongst academics in the last few years has been closely associated with the growth and development of 'quantified control' (2012, p. 355). Ordinary academic practices such as student recruitment, teaching, applying for research funding or publishing have all become 'metricised' (Burrows, 2012). In the neoliberal university, these metrics 'function as a form of measure able to translate different forms of value. Academic value is, essentially becoming monetised' (Burrows, 2012, p. 369, italics in original). Burrows leaves the question of the appropriate response for readers to contemplate: 'other than episodic declarations to "KIS my FECing AcSS", or suchlike, how do we resist?' (p. 369). How, indeed?

'Emotions do things': Feelings as political resources

In order to approach the question of how academics might resist and rework neoliberalism within their institutions I

suggest that activists and researchers need to think about emotions in an additional way to the 'diagnostic' model I introduced at the outset of this article. While clearly complex emotional experiences should be understood as influenced by political phenomena, they may also be understood, in a more active sense, as forces that steer political decision-making and practice. As the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed has argued, 'emotions do things' creating 'the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds' (2004, p. 117). Ahmed contends that:

> we need to consider how [emotions] work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective (2004 p. 119)

Following Ahmed's argument here means understanding emotional experiences as not only consequences of political processes, but seeing them as constitutive in the construction of the political sphere. If emotions do things, this means they can be potential resources for political thought and practice. Indeed, many critical higher education scholars have also written about emotions in this way. Those who have called for political intervention in universities have often called for radical responses such as collective action (Gill, 2010; Pereira, 2016), unionisation (Thatcher, 2012) and protest (Gill, 2010), which are often understood to be animated by particular kinds of feelings. Indeed, if we take a closer look at how higher education scholars write about what emotions do politically, we can see particular habits of thought that have tended to frame the claims made on the affective-political. Certain affective practices appear to have achieved 'an aura of legitimacy, and political recognisability, while others tend to be regarded with suspicion' (Burford, 2015b, p. 776). On the recognisable end are 'strong' feelings like hope, rage, anger and frustration, which critical scholars have often looked to for their capacities to spark collective political resistance. On the suspicious end are 'weak' feelings such as numbness, shame, exhaustion, depression and anxiety, which seem to offer limited political use.

A piece that demonstrates the lines of the argument in favour of strong 'political' feelings is Jane Kenway, Rebecca Boden and Johannah Fahey's 2014 chapter entitled 'Seeking the necessary "Resources of Hope" in the Neoliberal University'. This paper echoes those I have cited above, offering a valuable critique of creeping neoliberalism in higher education institutions. Despite diagnosing the current state of higher education as toxic, the authors ask researchers of academic life and labour to move beyond seemingly common 'dirges of despair' (p. 259). Kenway, Boden and Fahey identify a 'constant descent into critique that characterises much progressive analysis of the contemporary university' (2014, p. 259). While a body of critical scholarship has been developed, they argue that it is questionable whether such work has had a transformative impact. As the authors note, on the contrary it seems that 'the situation just gets worse' (2014, p. 259). In particular, Kenway, Boden and Fahey question the normative affective practice of 'gloom' (2014, p. 261) in the production of critical higher education knowledge. Expanding from Raymond Williams' argument that 'to be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing' (1989, p. 118), Kenway, Boden and Fahey (2014) question whether practices of critique in higher education research have contributed more to the latter than the former. In response, the authors set about assembling their own archive of hopeful academic practices.

In pursuit of 'resources of hope', Kenway, Boden and Fahey (2014) offer examples of both institutions and individuals who provide compelling alternatives to prevailing neoliberal norms. For institutions, they suggest further inquiry into comparatively collaborative models of organisation, such as the Mondragón Co-operative Corporation in Spain (Greenwood, Wright & Boden 2011, 41). For individuals, they offer particular 'figures of hope' including the cultural theorists Meaghan Morris, Sneja Gunew and Rosi Braidotti. Describing these scholars as 'insurgent intellectuals' (p. 274), Kenway, Boden and Fahey suggest that their optimism of the will has offered much needed alternatives to neoliberal discourse. Kenway, Boden and Fahey (2014) also identify hope as residing with collective action and 'civic courage' (p. 279). They recount examples of hopeful student activism which coalesced in opposition to budget cuts to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science (HUSS) at La Trobe University, as well as 2013 staff strikes at the University of Sydney. As a parting image, Kenway, Boden and Fahey (2014) offer academics the figure of the 'man on a wire'. Recounting the story of Phillippe Petit, the young tightrope walker who walked along a wire suspended between New York's Twin Towers in 1974, they remind us that 'foolish acts can be beautiful, sublime and inspirational' (p. 281). Such symbolic acts might remind critical academics of 'the importance of optimism of the will, intellect and spirit' (Kenway, Boden & Fahey, 2014, p. 281). Kenway, Boden and Fahey's hopeful archive is of 'small spaces' within academic practice where, despite the larger picture of declining conditions, 'academics still manage to find various orders of "old fashioned" satisfaction, even pleasure in their working worlds' (Kenway, Boden & Fahey, 2014, p. 261). They declare that the ultimate goal of their chapter is

to contribute to 'a new economy of hope, where these precious resources and their strategic utilisation combine so as to achieve a multiplier effect' (2014, p. 261). For Kenway, Boden and Fahey, now is the time for academics to be audacious, precisely because 'audacity is in short supply, but cynicism, fear and even hostility and despair are not' (p. 266).

The remainder of my article might be understood as an extended reply to Kenway, Boden and Fahey's (2014) incisive piece. I claim solidarity with their departure from prevailing practices of critique in higher education research, and also share an interest in documenting the existing ways in which academic life can already be made more livable. However, the key area where our projects diverge is that Kenway, Boden and Fahey (2014) fix their attention on the political utility of tracking optimism and hope, whereas I focus mine on feelings like depression and burnout. I agree with the authors that there is no shortage of cynicism, fear, hostility or despair among academic workers, and yet I argue this is why it is so important that we come to understand these feelings better. It is my view that researchers with an interest in activism (or activists who see research as their day job) should suss out the potential logics and activist possibilities of such felt experiences that appear to be so prevalent. By advocating for the investigation of these objects I am building on the work of a number of queer and feminist scholars who have also been thinking about the agentic potentials of negative feeling over recent years (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2012; Blackman, 2015; Cvetkovich, 2012; Love 2007; Probyn, 2005).

While it is my goal to animate queer and feminist concepts in order to tarry with the negative, I wish to be clear that I see this as a continuation of recent higher education thinking on affective-politics rather than a rejection of this work. Indeed, I myself have participated in identifying both affective practices that appear to be politically helpful such as pride (Burford, 2015a), and those that appear to have limited political use, such as the invitation to 'keep calm and carry on' writing amid a scene of growing pressure on academic subjects to 'measure up' (Burford, 2014, 2015b). It is not my desire to argue against scholars who have curated possible pathways for hope and optimism, and I do not mean to suggest that affects like audacity and hope are lacking in activist potential. My concern is not a general disavowal of projects grounded in positive affect, rather it is more narrowly conceived as a project which attends to the capacities of practices that tend to be configured on the other side of the affective-political dichotomy. My point is, quite simply, that I am concerned that some affects like cynicism, fear, hostility and depression are frequently written-off without due consideration of their agentive capacities. While I understand desires to move academics on from 'dirges of despair' (Kenway, Boden & Fahey, 2014, p. 259), I am suggesting that it may be politically profitable to think about what happens when academics feel bad, and the kinds of transformations these negative felt experiences might generate. I am hopeful that such an analysis might compliment Kenway, Boden and Fahey's (2014) useful work, and keep feelings – both good and bad – in critical circulation.

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In the section that follows I introduce the queer and feminist criticism that my own thinking emerges from before moving on to reconsider how higher education researchers may approach academic depression.

Queer and feminist accounts of the politics of negative feeling

Over recent years there has been growing interest among feminist and queer cultural theorists to 'challenge the idea that feelings, emotions, or affects properly and only belong to the domain of private life and to the intimacies of family, love, and friendship' (Cvetkovich & Pellegrini, 2003, p. 1). Instead, within these debates feelings have been recast as 'central to public life, from the deployment of affect to produce national patriotism, to the rallying of audiences on behalf of social forms of oppression and violence, to passionate calls for activism' (Cvetkovich & Pellegrini, 2003, p. 1). Rather than viewing this work as situated only within the "affective turn" in cultural theory and the social sciences, much of this work traces its roots back to earlier feminist resources including the mobilising idea that "the personal is political". In recent times, queer and feminist scholars have attended to the emotional dynamics of an ordinary life contextualised by economic precarity, ongoing wars, racist violence, and enduring sexism and homophobia. Much of this work has tracked the ways in which emotions are weaponised in the public

sphere and targeted toward women, and racial and sexual minorities, among others.

This article builds on a particular strain of queer and feminist cultural theory that has explored the politics of negative affect (Blackman, 2015; Ngai, 2005; Wiegman, 2014). These debates have involved attempts to debunk commonsense attachments to positive feelings (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Halberstam, 2011) as well as renewed interest in negative affect as 'offering productive possibilities for political practice and social transformation' (Blackman, 2015, p. 25).

At one end, scholars have cast a more critical eye over the political liabilities of positive affects like pride and positivity (Halberstam, 2005), happiness (Ahmed, 2010), love (Kipnis, 2003) and optimism (Berlant, 2011). For example, Ahmed (2010) has critiqued the conventional 'promise of happiness', observing the way that feminists, queers and migrants are often positioned as troublemakers and 'killjoys' who disturb its normative conditions. She also offers a sceptical take on the (heteronormative, racist, sexist) forms of happiness that tend to be promised. In a similar vein Berlant 'stalks optimism's cruelty' (Wiegman, 2014, p. 6) with the aim of exposing its ability to 'tether people to objects that impede their flourishing' (2014, p. 6). Jack Halberstam has also called out the limiting political horizons opened up by certain positive feelings. He has pointed out the associations of the LGBTI Pride parade with consumerism (2005) and critiqued the 'saccharine message' of the "It gets Better" campaign which targets LGBTI young people who are bullied or suicidal with messages to hang on to hope. As Halberstam observes, 'only a very small and privileged population can say with any confidence: "It gets better!"', and videos created by 'impossibly good looking and successful people smugly recounting the highlights of their fabulous lives is just PR for the status quo' (2010, para. 3). This interest in thinking against positive affect is present within existing higher education scholarship too. For example, Valerie Hey (2004) has scrutinised the perverse pleasures of intellectual labour for feminists, and Eva Bendix Petersen (2012) has examined the 'monstrousness' of love in the neoliberal university. Yet what has thus far been absent from higher education research is the re-consideration of critically de-valued affective practices and subject positions.

Fortunately, queer and feminist scholars have been attending to this absence. Much queer and feminist work on affect in recent years has been investigating the possibilities and potentials of feelings that are typically coded as 'bad' like shame (Halperin & Traub, 2009; Probyn, 2005), failure (Halberstam, 2011), depression (Cvetkovich, 2012) and anxiety (Burford, 2015b). Rather than 'pastoralising or redemptive accounts of negative feeling that seek to convert it into something useful or positive' (Cvetkovich, 2012, pp. 5-6), these scholars have sought to see what potential may come out of negativity itself. The primary methodology taken up has been one of de-familiarisation, whereby commonsense associations of pathology have been re-considered, in order to ask questions about the possible routes to agency and transformation 'bad feelings' might open up (Blackman, 2015). Reflecting on why queer theory has such a penchant for negative affect, Cvetkovich (2012) sets these debates inside the political disappointments of queer activism in the 1990s, 'as radical potential ...mutated into assimilationist agenda and has left some of us wondering how domestic partner benefits and marriage equality became the movement's rallying cry' (p. 6).

A further example of this strain of work is Heather Love's *Feeling Backwards* (2007), which explores why theorists ought to consider the bad feelings of 'queer' historical figures not only as evidence of their backwardness, but also to see how these histories of feeling may have enduring effects. Love problematises the common portrayal of 'useless feelings' such as envy, despair and anxiety as unsuited to political action. To the contrary, Love (2007) argues such feelings may not indicate a disinterest in action, but may instead express something about 'how and why action is blocked' (2007, p. 13). They may even contribute to queer kinds of political activity that are not currently visible. Exploring the possibilities of often written-off affects is important because, as Love notes, 'the small repertoire of feelings that count as political – hope, anger, solidarity – have done a lot. But...a lot is not nearly enough' (2007, p. 27).

Usefully, Love outlines how her argument for a queer politics that encompasses negative affect might work in practice. She describes a Chicago-based group called Feel Tank, which has:

> attempted to mobilise negative feelings such as paranoia and despair in order to make social change; they have established public events such as a yearly depression march, where marchers wear bathrobes and slippers, pass out prescriptions for Prozac, and carry placards that say things like 'Depressed? It might be political' (Love, 2007, p. 26)

Love's account here is helpful for the purposes of this article for at least two reasons. In the first case it supports the broad argument that I am pursuing that queer and feminist conceptualisations of affect may offer nuanced

methodologies to interrogate commonsense affective-political imaginaries. But in a second and more immediate sense it is helpful because it is to queer and feminist conceptualisations of depression that I turn to next.

What can depression do?

In her latest book, *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Ann Cvetkovich (2012) describes her work as one of the 'cells' of a broader scholarly collaboration called 'Public Feelings' which began in 2001. According to Cvetkovich, this group of researchers is interested in exploring 'everyday feelings as an entry point on to political life' (2012, p. 132). She describes their interest in the ways in which:

> the systemic forces of capitalism, racism, and sexism make us feel, and it is curious to work with despair, burnout, hopelessness, and depression rather than dismissing these ostensibly negative affects as debilitating liabilities or shameful failures (2012, p. 132-133).

Cvetkovich's (2012) book carves out a unique space between genres, being part memoir and part critical essay. In this turn to memoir her work can be read alongside a number of other scholars who have explored their personal experiences of negotiating emotional ill-being (Davis, 2008; Trivelli, 2014). The memoir component of the book – called 'The Depression Journals' – is set inside Cvetkovich's working context of academia, where the bumps and isolations associated with developing an academic career (searching for a job, finishing a dissertation, writing a first book) as well as activist and ordinary life (moving city, the end of a relationship, family bereavement, the HIV/AIDS epidemic) led to a personal struggle with depression, and various forms of treatment. Importantly, Cvetkovich situates her depression within ordinary academic experience, evoking a context that many of us probably know too well, 'where the pressure to succeed and the desire to find space for creative thinking bump up against the harsh conditions of a ruthlessly competitive job market, the shrinking power of the humanities, and the corporatisation of the university' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 17). Yet this ordinary scene also produced extraordinarily powerful feelings, including a sense that 'academia seemed to be killing me' (2012, p. 18).

Cvetkovich is critical of the way the medical model dominates our responses to depression. She views psychological narratives of bad events experienced in childhood, or biomedical disorders as ways of narrating social problems as personal ones. For Cvetkovich (2012), rather than only a medical disease, we ought to understand how depression is also a 'cultural and social phenomenon' (p. 1) that is linked to structural forces, such as colonisation, slavery, and neoliberalism. Indeed, she suggests that the word 'depression' itself might be a way of describing the felt experience of the legacies of violence and discrimination and the ways these forces shape the contemporary political economy. In line with Elizabeth Wilson's (2015) *Gut Feminism,* Cvetkovich does not dismiss biology outright in order to advance her social account of depression. Instead, she suggests that an intermediary position, which combines both psyche and soma, may allow us to avoid numerous either/or choices 'between body and mind, medicine and politics, biology and culture, nature and nurture' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 104).

In addition to critiquing the medical model, Cvetkovich (2012) is also critical of traditional forms of progressive critique. Where Left political analysis might ordinarily 'advocate revolution and regime change over pills' (p. 2), within Cvetkovich's (2012) queer-feminist approach to depression there are 'no magic bullet solutions, whether medical or political, just the slow steady work of resilient survival, utopian dreaming, and other affective tools for transformation' (p. 2). Cvetkovich explains that her departure from customary forms of political response emerges out of questions about whether 'direct action and critical analysis' still work 'either to change the world or to make us feel better' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 1). Furthermore, simply making the argument that depression is socially produced also 'provides little specific illumination and even less comfort because it's an analysis that frequently admits of no solution' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 15). As Cvetkovich notes, 'saying that capitalism (or colonialism or racism) is the problem does not help me to get up in the morning' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 15). For Cvetkovich, an alternative methodology is needed in order to respond to academic-activist political despair and burnout.

The alternative methodology she proposes involves exploring what depression might teach us about our personal and public lives. While as individuals we might wish to rid ourselves of bad feelings, Cvetkovich suggests that taking them as objects of inquiry might facilitate new insights about why they arise and how we might repair them. By advocating an approach that would see us work with depression rather than dismissing it outright, Cvetkovich explores responses infrequently considered within traditional forms of progressive critique. She states that her goal is to produce work that can 'explain why we live in a culture whose violence takes the form of systematically making us feel bad' (p. 15), as well as to

offer 'some clues to survive those conditions and even to change them' (p. 15). The objective of finding tactics to travel through depression means starting with different questions. One I have found helpful to ponder is this: if we accept that feeling bad may be one of the consequences of life in the neoliberal university, then how should we seek to live our academic lives?

Cvetkovich found her answers in ordinary practices: 'if depression is conceived of as blockage or impasse or being stuck, then its cure might lie in forms of flexibility or creativity more so than in pills or a different genetic structure' (p. 21). She details how she addressed her own feelings of despair and stuckness via regular practices that 'both accommodate depression and alleviate it' (p. 26). For Cvetkovich (2012), the development of everyday routines was a key aspect of 'the reparative work of daily living' (p. 26). For example, ordinary self-care practices like swimming and yoga, the construction of a spiritual altar at her office, swallowing antidepressant medication and making regular trips to the dentist were all important. As was going for dinner with friends and finding community in queer and feminist art scenes. Even the memoir writing process itself became part of her reparative practice. Building on process-based approaches to writing extolled in popular books like Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* (1995) and Natalie Goldberg's *Feeling down the Bones* (2005), Cvetkovich argues that writing can present opportunities to attend to the present moment. The cultural texts Cvetkovich (2012) analyses in the remainder of her book also highlight everyday practices of sacredness, communal feminist 'craftivism' and other creative practices that work both alongside and through depression.

Cvetkovich is careful not to over-claim. She recognises that the practices she sketches are 'modest forms of transformation' (p. 80), but also wishes to recognise the meaningful impact they had for her. Indeed, while she suggests that 'transformative daily habit' (p. 76) may be conceived as an 'antidote to despair and political depression' (p. 80) this suggestion is offered in the form of a contextualised life story rather than a list of tips and tricks one might commonly see in the self-help literature. The lesson that academic activists might draw from this is that if academic depression is an ordinary occurrence, then the responses we contemplate may also be grounded in daily life rather than 'the stuff of heroic or instantaneous transformation' (p. 80). The point is to do something. Certainly, this something might be small, because sometimes, for some people, and in some places 'just getting by' remains an important political practice (p. 159).

Let me return to the question I asked in the subheading above: what can depression do? I suggest that by starting with different feelings, Cvetkovich demonstrates that we can open up different ways of thinking about life in the neoliberal university. Depathologising depression allows us to become more curious about what depression may have to teach us about living life and doing politics. I am sure that some readers might be wondering if this discussion simply replaces one prescription for revolution with another for workplace wellness in a way that evacuates the social and political sphere. I accept that ordinary acts like 'going swimming, doing yoga, getting a cat, visiting a sick friend' (p. 82) may be seen as insufficient responses to the political challenges that face us. And yet I find value in Cvetkovich's work because it remains sensitive to the ways in which transformation is a 'slow and painstaking process, open-ended and marked by struggle, not by magic bullet solutions or happy endings, even the happy ending of social justice that many political critiques of therapeutic culture recommend' (p. 80). For Cvetkovich, ordinary routines are one answer to the difficult questions of what makes life meaningful and how social transformation can occur. She offers us tools to think about how the revolution and utopia might be made via ordinary habits in our academic lives rather than 'giant transformations or rescues' (p. 80).

Conclusion: So, what might 'bad feelings' be good for?

It has been my proposition throughout this article that critical higher education researchers tend to tell particular kinds of stories about academic activism, which reproduce certain habits of thought about the transformative capacities of affective practices. In their analyses of the changing context of academic work and what should be done about it, critical higher education researchers tend to discern particular emotions which might open onto political practice, and others which might forecast the opposite. Often 'strong' emotions, such as anger or hope are viewed as having significant political value, while those affects seen as consequences of the precarious present – such as depression – are viewed as unlikely to transform it. Insofar as some feelings are customarily characterised as politically unhelpful, they afford what the queer theorist Annamarie Jagose (2011) might call 'a welcome because improbable' (p. 518) opportunity for rethinking the relationship between feeling and politics. It has been my goal in this article to

interrupt critical common sense, and to ask questions about the political utility of bad feelings.

I would like to circle back to the spark that prompted this article – engaging with Kenway, Boden and Fahey's (2014) argument in favour of curating examples of 'spaces of hope' in the neoliberal university. I agree with the authors, that hope is an important political resource for activist academics. Yet I believe that we ought to remain curious about the other end of the affective spectrum too. While it may be counterintuitive to think of depression as potentially agentic, this article has demonstrated why such queer ways of thinking may be fruitful. This article has not sought to advocate being miserable, instead, I have tried to explore what might happen if concepts from the 'negative turn' in queer and feminist theory were brought into contact with higher education accounts of affective-politics. Such approaches may call us to re-position the affective-politics of academic work in more messy and multi-directional ways. For example, we might challenge fixed notions of what the political energies of bad feelings may be, or understand that hope and despair often 'remain entwined' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 2). The significance of this queer-feminist theoretical analysis is that it troubles common sense modes of recognising which affective or political practices may open onto possibility for action in the present.

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