

FILM REVIEW

Sara Chitambo-Hatira, dir. *Black People Don't Get Depressed*. 2024. 82 minutes. English, Zulu. Bemba, USA. No price reported.

Sara Chitambo-Hatira's feature-length directorial debut is a treasure trove of images and words. Like all works born from a tangle of complex experiences and private emotions, *Black People Don't Get Depressed* demands to be seen several times to appreciate its richness and become a tool for research and learning. This is because talking about mental suffering in African countries and in the diaspora means not only deciding which diagnostic categories to suggest and which to abandon, but also plunging oneself in a history of arbitrariness, indifference, and tragic misunderstandings. African cinema does not have many works on the theme of mental illness: the fact that it is female directors who explore this territory of violence, wounded worlds, and loneliness is not insignificant. On the French-speaking side, we can recall the work of Khady Silla, a Senegalese filmmaker and writer who passed away in 2013. Her *Une fenêtre ouverte* [An Open Window] is a unique testimony in its density and delicacy, and, like Chitambo-Hatira, tells the first-person story of a woman, an intellectual who looks into the deepest folds of her illness, trying to talk to another patient in an attempt to establish a difficult friendship.


Shot in South Africa, Zambia, and Canada, the film aims to bring to light stories of suffering and resistance, where diagnostic categories lose the arrogant clarity of their boundaries and definitions as soon as they are submitted to the historical lens. Psychiatric diagnosis in Africa, in the colonies or elsewhere, has often been an instrument of domination, complicit in an "economy of denial" (in the psychoanalytic sense of the term) of the social and historical roots of suffering. For instance, in colonial Algeria, feeling persecuted by spirits who ordered them to cut their throats "because otherwise the French would do it" was, for Suzanne Taïeb, a Tunisian psychiatrist, just another expression of beliefs and "ideas of influence" characteristic of North African culture. It is in these acts of denial that epistemic injustice and diagnostic racism became intertwined, creating a unique tangle where subjugation speaks the language of psychiatry, and resorting to other idioms to express one's pain was often dismissed as mere tradition or cultural belief.

As Chitambo-Hatira states, when you are struggling with depression, nothing is safe from it. This is something to keep in mind, because mental suffering invades every corner of your existence, placing itself outside and against common sense. But is this sense really "common"? The world has been crossed by a line of color that, even when ignored or masked, has divided experience like a scalpel, even that of illness and its destiny. But why has the possibility that

Black people could also suffer from depression been denied for so long? In 1932, Mann Bond wrote an article in which he clearly showed how this ridiculous idea was the inevitable product of racial prejudice, according to which Black people “have less ‘mind’ than white people.” It was against these stereotypes that, twenty years after Mann Bond’s critique, Frantz Fanon rose up, denouncing in *Black Skin, White Masks* the racial roots of colonial psychiatry, where in a note he writes that he would have liked to study “the black man’s attitude toward death,” adding: “We considered it essential because people kept saying that the black man does not commit suicide.” It is precisely for these reasons that the dialogues in Chitambo-Hatira become, willingly or unwillingly, an invitation to question a dark archive that has attributed imaginary disorders to Black people or even transformed their political protests into pathologies. It is a true counter-archive, where it is possible to weave together voices, places and memories that would otherwise have been forgotten and lost forever. A counter-archive made often from the myths and historical reappropriation of slavery, as Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) remind us.

Even today, mental illness and depression in Africa are not just a chapter of psychiatry, but part of a collective history marked by loss and dispossession, by “colonialism and oppression,” by fear. But Chitambo-Hatira’s film is not just a work about emotions, suffering, and history. It is a project that aims to explore how it is possible to reclaim one’s suffering, family history, and painful secrets, transforming them into a collective art of healing, within which a poetics of care takes shape through gestures of solidarity and creativity. The protagonists—writers, musicians, actors, marketing managers, local therapists—talk about how they were able to metamorphose their symptoms into theatrical performances or poetry. However, there is never trivialization of a process that is known to be uncertain and challenging (once alone, the waves of suffering come flooding back). Living one’s existence always exposed, one’s body under threat, constitutes the most basic form of stress, the effect of which is, yes, “depression” in Black people, but understood as a political symptom, not just a simple neuroendocrine imbalance.

The film successfully explores these issues, without claiming to impose a rigid framework or a single interpretation, and Chitambo-Hatira demonstrates her ability to craft storytelling as a tool for healing. And so, the word “depression” in the title gradually reveals another meaning and suggests that, alongside the need to receive an adequate clinical diagnosis for one’s condition of suffering and to be able to access treatment, it is the historical and racial meaning of this pain that needs to be recognized and redeemed.

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