Ann Cvetkovich
Depression: A Public Feeling
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Depression: A Public Feeling is Ann Cvetkovich's queer feminist project of theorizing depression through an embodied, socially contextualized epistemology that values feeling and frames depression as political. It testifies to the mental health hazards of neoliberal capitalism, stressing both the "ordinariness" and the political nature of depression under these conditions, and furthermore "investigates the productive possibilities of depression" (14). Cvetkovich aims to contribute to "new ways of doing cultural studies that move past the work of critique or the exposure of social construction" (13), and one tool for this is combining memoir and critical essay.

The first half of the book offers a memoir of Cvetkovich's depression while writing her dissertation and first book, taking up narrative "as a form of notebook or experimental inquiry" (24). A central thread involves her navigation of academic rites of passage, including the job market (which she would eventually see "many people made crazy by" [31]), dissertation defense, cross-country relocation, attempting to revise the dissertation for publication---all accompanied by protracted and highly debilitating states described with terms escalating from "pressure" and "anxiety" to "dread" and "despair." Cvetkovich's deepest depression comes on the heels of receiving both a book contract and a postdoctoral fellowship. A paradoxical sense of dread follows, only heightened by the sense that these should be experienced as positive events, and that she should be feeling something along the lines of pleasure and satisfaction instead, a state of dissonance that only fuels her depression.

The embodied nature of depression emerges in part through its portrayal as a spatiotemporal crisis: a deep sense of dislocation that is a disconnection from home and the familial and broader social histories it represents, and an increasing disconnection from/unease with ordinary temporal rhythms---those of academic life, domestic life, self-care, and social life. A response to depression (if not a cure) eventually emerges as Cvetkovich learns to cultivate habits or practices of physical movement, self-care, and creative expression using crafting to reconfigure home and domesticity---tools that, together with her participation in queer cultures and activism, go a long way toward

making life livable. These methods indicate the necessity of integrating body, mind, and spirit in responding to depression.

The second half takes the form of a critical essay in three chapters. The first of these examines cultural studies as a framework for responding to depression, advocating alternative modes of theorizing (such as integrating personal narrative and critical reflection) in order to move beyond the limitations of analyzing the cultural construction of affect in order to foster more generative analysis as well. In these ways, Cvetkovich contributes to cultural studies critiques of the medical model of depression, while also seeking "new ways to describe feelings---or the intersections of mind and body that encompass not just more cognitive forms of emotion but the embodied senses" (24). "Depression," she declares, is "too thin and undescriptive a term" (196–97).

She challenges the medicalized model of depression as disturbed brain chemistry, which under neoliberalism is made evident in part through a failure of productivity, "a major problem for neoliberal and market-based conceptions of the self that turn on productivity as a sign of one's identity" (113). In addition to using memoir as a kind of thick description, she seeks alternatives to a neoliberal medical model by revisiting historical frameworks of melancholy and acedia, an early monastic notion of spiritual crisis described as "weariness or distress of heart" (85). These conceptions, she contends, can help us to understand depression as meaningful through their recognition of sadness as both "a normative part of cultural experience" and "a creative force" (107).

The second chapter politicizes this project further by exploring roots of depression in historical legacies such as racism, slavery, and colonialism; in ongoing segregation; and in systemic economic inequalities. Within the archive of popular literature, the term *depression* appears mostly in narratives of white middle-class subjects. Thus, Cvetkovich moves away from popular memoir, instead taking up other types of narrative: those of feminist scholars of the African diaspora addressing the struggles inherent to such scholarship, as well as depression narratives dealing with class vulnerability and displacement. She contends that these works reveal "a source of melancholy or depression" in their geographies of inequality and lost homelands (151). In response, she aims for "a practice of radical self-possession" requiring us to acknowledge "intimate histories of displacement and loss" (153). This method is predicated on "an indigenous epistemology that starts from the question 'Whose traditional land are we on?'" (153).

The third chapter assesses queer feminist crafting, performance, and other cultural forms for their potential to inform practices of daily living, finding that they "lin[k] spiritual practice and creative practice . . . as forms of felt or embodied response to getting blocked or stuck in activism and academia" (26). Here, she considers artists whose work blurs art/craft boundaries, and reclaims reconfigured queer and feminist forms of domesticity and kinship. She assesses "craftivism" and its ways of "reinventing what we might mean" by politics (174). These practices are all taken up for their illumination of "the utopia of everyday habit," which "constitutes hope and the antidote to political despair and depression" (80).

One of the ways in which *Depression: A Public Feeling* speaks to feminist philosophies of disability is through its insistence on approaching depression simultaneously as "hidden knowledge" (146), as "productive possibilities" (14), and also as a problem requiring solutions, if not a cure---as suffering requiring a "reparative" approach (202).

In laying out her account of depression---or "feeling bad"---as epistemologically rich, Cvetkovich takes up Jeffrey Smith's environmentalist memoir *Where the Roots Reach for Water: A Personal and Natural History of Melancholia*. Smith "embraces the possibility . . . that depression is hidden knowledge" when his therapist suggests he "consider what depression might be trying to tell him" (146). Yet the resulting narrative goes beyond conventional stories of rediscovering some sense of personal potential that had been thwarted by life challenges. Cvetkovich shows how Smith links his own family's troubled history to broader histories of poor white settlement in Appalachia, industrialization, and its attendant damage to lands and displacement of people (148–49). Although popular narratives of illness often frame illness as therapeutic due to its ability to trigger a reexamination of one's life, resulting in opportunities for change (Frank 1995), Cvetkovich valorizes depression narratives as a significant epistemic resource because of their potential for witnessing the operations of political oppression, as much as a therapeutic tool for ameliorating individual suffering. She concludes, "The proposal that lost homelands are a source of melancholy or depression calls for multiple histories of colonization in the Americas, which displaces both native peoples and immigrants of all kinds, to become part of research on depression" (151).

Cvetkovich situates her work in the Public Feelings Project in cultural studies, a central goal of which is to "reintroduce feelings into politics" (104). She takes care to distance her position from a humanist view of depression as melancholy that is congruent with medicalized notions of scientific triumph over depression insofar as "they are both invested in a history that is progressive and continuous" (107). Instead, Cvetkovich's approach reflects Public Feelings' emphasis on the inseparability of affect from politics:

> Rather than seeing negative feelings of failure, mourning, despair, and shame as getting in the way of politics or needing to be converted to something more active in order to become politics, such work attends to felt experience as not only already political but as transforming our understandings of what counts as political. (110)

This approach has much to offer feminist disability studies efforts to address the fraught question of disability-related pain and suffering. In asserting the value of disability aesthetics, physicalities, and general ways of thinking, feeling, and being in the world, a model of disability as central to human experience (rather than a departure or aberration) sometimes generates pressure to deny any negative feelings associated with disability-related pain or suffering as a form of false consciousness, particularly if that suffering cannot be clearly demarcated as arising from disabling societal forces. Cvetkovich's account both accepts that depression entails suffering, indeed is defined by it, and shows how working to change this affect is simultaneously---to use the familiar language of

second-wave feminism---political and personal. In this way, Cvetkovich contests Lauren Berlant's assertion that changes in affect "'are not equal to changing the world'" (167).

Through her "reparative" approach (following Eve Sedgwick's articulation of reparative criticism [5]), however, Cvetkovich avoids the trap of romanticizing depression, melancholy, or "feeling bad." One point of departure for this approach is the 1980s feminist sex wars, and a resulting sense of the productive potential of tension and conflict that "has led [Cvetkovich] to a reparative perspective that embraces conflict rather than separating out right from wrong" (10). She offers her memoir "in the reparative spirit of figuring out what memoir can do for public discourse, rather than being exclusively concerned with critiquing where it fails" (78). A reparative spirit also motivates her discussion of lesbian artists Sheila Pepe and Alison Mitchell, who

> claim a connection to Judy Chicago. . . . Not only does their work exhibit a reparative attitude to conflicts within feminism and between art and craft, but the utopian spaces of their large-scale installations produce a reparative experience of depression by literally engaging the senses in a way that makes things feel different. (177)

Ultimately, "reparative" conveys Cvetkovich's perspective of depression as a call to both "the reparative work of daily living" and to the collective work of social change (26)---while indicating that the two modes are always connected.

Cvetkovich could be speaking of her own work when she discusses how Berlant "challenge[s] understandings of sovereignty that presume a rational subject in control of her desires" (167). Crafting for her is an exemplary practice because it "fosters ways of being in the world in which the body moves the mind rather than the other way around" (168). *Depression: A Public Feeling* offers a provocative methodology and a rich contribution to emerging feminist disability conversations regarding notions of agency and epistemology in the context of "disabled bodymind" (Price 2014).

References

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