

<http://somatosphere.net/2013/10/ann-cvetkovichs-depression-a-public-feeling.html>

Ann Cvetkovich's Depression: A Public Feeling

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By Angela Woods



ANN CVETKOVICH

[Depression: A Public Feeling](#)

by [Ann Cvetkovich](#)

Duke University Press, 2012. 296 pages, US\$23.95

Faith Wilding's 1972 installation *Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)*. The "twisted" "maternal melodrama" of New York cabaret performers Kiki and Herb. A memoir exploring academic anguish, the comfort of familiar bed linen, exhaustion and the sustenance of swimming. Saidiya Hartman's *Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. The daily leaf-collecting rituals of Abbot Paul, a fourth-century monk. A "cluster of keywords such as *hope, happiness, optimism, and especially utopia*" (189).

Ann Cvetkovich's "depression archive" is an unashamedly idiosyncratic assemblage of texts, concepts and characters which prises apart the

category of depression and sets it to work in new and often surprising ways. Beginning in the mode of memoir, Cvetkovich's own "depression journals" describe the crises of energy, confidence and self-motivation experienced at various points throughout the first twenty years of her highly successful academic career. They are followed by three theoretical essays – on the contemporary resonance of the ancient Christian concept of *acedia*; on life-writing, radical self-possession, and the legacies of racism; and on crafting as spiritual practice and depressive survival strategy. Through a focus on the ordinary and everyday, on affective practices as well as affect theory, and on resources for collective action, Cvetkovich's *Public Feelings* project confronts the "low-level buzz of worry and anxiety and forms of daily stress that bog people down to the point where they're so numb or weary they can't even really pay attention to anything other than what's right in front of them." (157)

One of the key strengths of *Depression: A Public Feeling* is to be found in the way it occupies, juxtaposes and shifts between scenes or sites of depression – from the intimacies of autobiography to literary explorations of depression as the afterlife and affective reality of slavery. Cvetkovich invites the reader in to the "small and frequently ephemeral niche of queer and feminist bohemia" which sustains her politically, spirituality, socially, and intellectually – a vantage point from which she can offer compelling close readings of a wide range of cultural texts while also keeping a critical distance from "specific-turned-universal" medical accounts of depression (159-160). The book urges a commitment to a new form of cultural studies which places feeling at the heart of inquiry, works through keywords or "nodal points," traverses disciplinary boundaries, and sees itself as moving "past the work of critique or the exposure of social constructions" (13) to embrace instead the "slow steady work of resilient survival, utopian dreaming, and other affective tools for transformation" (2).

So, is it successful?

Something doesn't ring true about Cvetkovich's claim to methodological innovation – or, rather, something still feels lacking. While I admire her approach – the trope of the archive, the productive collision between practice and scholarship, even the understandably anxious appeal to autobiographical authority – at times the bow is stretched too far, the argument becomes as fuzzy as the raw materials of "knitting-based activism" (175), and, perhaps most troubling of all, the somewhat straw figure of a "medicalised" depression propped up by the pharmaceutical industry is left more or less untouched and un-interrogated. Emphasising experiences of impasse, blockage and being stuck (20), and depression as mood, atmosphere, and sensibility (158), Cvetkovich is at pains to distance herself from writers and cultural theorists who draw on medical, or even melancholic, models of depression. "I want to say something

about that state that satisfies me in a way that all those bestsellers don't because they make depression so clinical, so extreme, so pathological, so alien." (15) But how, then, should we start to think about the relationship between "extreme" and "everyday" forms of depression? Is depression something experienced, or is it a metaphor for experience? Do the forms of "political" and "spiritual" depression described by Cvetkovich have a distinctive phenomenology? And why are they here presented as being only within the affective purview of the Left?

"This book began from a simple premise: that depression should be viewed as a social and cultural phenomenon, not a biological or medical one." (90) This statement goes to the heart of my unease with *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Cvetkovich ranges widely within the cultural sphere – canvassing early Christian theology, contemporary debates in trauma and affect theory, domestic practices and avant-garde filmmaking – but does not actually venture directly into the terrain of the "medical." This has the effect of erecting a dichotomy between "culture" and "medicine" and between "biological" and "social" explanations for depression which are tired, reductive and in my view ultimately unhelpful. For all its courage and originality, then, *Depression: A Public Feeling* lacks the weight and complexity of Alain Ehrenberg's [The Weariness of the Self](#) or Jonathan Metzl's [Prozac on the Couch](#). Instead of opening up to some of the interdisciplinary and increasingly critical work of the medical humanities, it remains safely if somewhat stubbornly within the sphere of American cultural studies. And while acknowledging, somewhat reluctantly, its status as a niche self-help book "directed to an audience of academics and queers" (209), it misses the opportunity to articulate how and if these forms of "help" have wider application, accessibility or appeal.

If these comments seem to traffic too much in the academic negativity Cvetkovich so elegantly dissects, this is not because I think she is wrong to challenge simplistic biomedical explanations of depression, query the currency they enjoy in contemporary neoliberal capitalist societies, or develop accounts of depression as an interpersonal and collective phenomenon. On the contrary, and despite my frustrations, it is precisely the urgency of these undertakings which makes *Depression: A Public Feeling* a book well worth "spending time with" (14).

Angela Woods is a [Lecturer in Medical Humanities at Durham University](#) and Co-Director of the [Hearing the Voice](#) project. Her first book, [The Sublime Object of Psychiatry: Schizophrenia in Clinical and Cultural Theory](#), was published in 2011, and her current research interests include the interplay between theoretical and subjective accounts of psychotic

experience and new modes of 'doing interdisciplinarity' in the critical medical humanities. She is founding editor of the [Centre for Medical Humanities](#) blog. You can read Woods' contribution to Somatosphere's "Top of the Heap" series [here](#).

Further Resources

[Ann Cvetkovich interviewed](#) by Jacqueline Wallace for "Books Aren't Dead (BAD)" Fembot series.

Elaine Showalter, "[Our Age of Anxiety](#)" (includes discussion of *Depression: A Public Feeling*) *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 8, 2013.

AMA citation

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