

DEPRESSION



ANN CVETKOVICH



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a public feeling

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For Gretchen

"Twenty years isn't much, you know I want
two hundred more . . ."

In writing this book I've continually felt pressed against the limits of my stupidity, even as I've felt the promising closeness of transmissible gifts.

—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*

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This book is about the value of process and the art of daily living, and I am honored to acknowledge the material and spiritual support of my family, especially my parents, Valerie Haig-Brown and Joseph Cvetkovich, and my aunt Celia Haig-Brown; Moe Angelos, my writing buddy; Helen Knode, who facilitated two crucial writing retreats in Carmel Valley; Annamarie Jagose, my exemplary partner in the work of editing *GLQ* that shadowed the book's writing; Allyson Mitchell and Sheila Pepe, for making the art that let me see and feel my ideas; Kay Turner, for intellectual and spiritual witchcraft; Liz Wiesen, for the phone sessions and the commitment to process; and my many tribes: Michfest, kundalini yoga, co-counseling, dyke artists, Austin queerdos, the cats. You know who you are. And, of course, there's Gretchen Phillips, with whom twenty years have gone by in a flash. She arrived as this story leaves off and continues to give me countless reasons to get up in the morning.

Introduction

PUBLIC FEELINGS: A COLLECTIVE PROJECT

A key inspiration for this book's desire to think about depression as a cultural and social phenomenon rather than a medical disease has been my collaborative engagement with other scholars under the rubric of Public Feelings. Begun in 2001 both nationally and at the University of Texas, our investigation has coincided with and operated in the shadow of September 11 and its ongoing consequences—a sentimental takeover of 9/11 to underwrite militarism, war in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush's reelection, and the list goes on. Rather than analyzing the geopolitical underpinnings of these developments, we've been more interested in their emotional dynamics. What makes it possible for people to vote for Bush or to assent to war, and how do these political decisions operate within the context of daily lives that are pervaded by a combination of anxiety and numbness? How can we, as intellectuals and activists, acknowledge our own political disappointments and failures in a way that can be enabling? Where might hope be possible? Those questions stem from the experience of what one of our cells, Feel Tank Chicago, has called "political depression," the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better.

Our meetings, whether public or among ourselves, are as likely to start with a mood as an idea; at one of our national gatherings, for example, many of us admitted to feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by our professional obligations, and we considered what kinds of projects might emerge out of those conditions and how to produce scholarship not timed to the rhythms and genres of conferences, edited collections, and books.¹ In a public event at the University of Texas shortly after the U.S. invaded Iraq, the dominant response was one of incredulity, a seemingly low-grade or normalized version of the epistemic shock that is said to accompany trauma. At another public UT event to dis-

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cuss reactions to Hurricane Katrina's devastations, many participants described a sense of divided attention as the movement back and forth between the everyday business of the semester's beginning and the urgency of the disaster created a split focus that also constitutes the lived experience of race and class divisions. Although *Public Feelings* was forged out of the crucible of the long Bush years, its style and substance are no less relevant to the uncertain record of the Obama presidency. Hope and despair remain entwined as we track the ongoing rhythms of war (in and out of Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan), financial meltdown, Arab springs, Occupy movements, and assaults on the university. A political analysis of depression might advocate revolution and regime change over pills, but in the world of *Public Feelings* 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.

In finding public forums for everyday feelings, including negative feelings that can seem so debilitating, so far from hopefulness about the future or activism, the aim is to generate new ways of thinking about agency. The concept of political depression is not, it should be emphasized, meant to be wholly depressing; indeed, *Feel Tank* has operated with the camp humor one might expect from a group of seasoned queer activists, organizing an International Day of the Politically Depressed in which participants were invited to show up in their bathrobes to indicate their fatigue with traditional forms of protest and distributing T-shirts and refrigerator magnets carrying the slogan "Depressed? It Might Be Political!"² The goal is to depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than as its antithesis. This is not, however, to suggest that depression is thereby converted into a positive experience; it retains its associations with inertia and despair, if not apathy and indifference, but these feelings, moods, and sensibilities become sites of publicity and community formation. One of the larger goals for *Public Feelings* is to generate the affective foundation of hope that is necessary for political action; hence the turn to utopia in much recent work related to its projects, but a utopia, borrowing from Avery Gordon's analysis of Toni Cade Bambara, for example, that is grounded in the here and now, in the recognition of the possibilities and powers that we have at our immediate disposal.³ 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. Thus, although this book is about depression, it's also about hope and even happiness, about how to live a better life by embracing rather than glossing over bad feelings. (In addition to drawing inspiration from the memoir, it also borrows from other manuals for better living, ranging from the philosophical treatise to the self-help book.) It asks how it might be possible to tarry with the negative as part of daily practice, cultural production, and political activism.

The Affective Turn

Public Feelings projects can be seen as one form of what is being called the affective turn in cultural criticism, which has not only made emotion, feeling, and affect (and their differences) the object of scholarly inquiry but has also inspired new ways of doing criticism.⁴ The affective turn is evident in many different areas of inquiry: cultural memory and public cultures that emerge in response to histories of trauma; the role of emotions such as fear and sentimentality in American political life and nationalist politics; the production of compassion and sympathy in human rights discourses and other forms of liberal representation of social issues and problems; discussions of the politics of negative affects, such as melancholy and shame, inspired in particular by queer theory's critique of the normal; new forms of historical inquiry, such as queer temporalities, that emphasize the affective relations between past and present; the turn to memoir and the personal in criticism as a sign of either the exhaustion of theory or its renewed life; the ongoing legacy of identity politics as another inspiration for the turn to the personal; continuing efforts to rethink psychoanalytic paradigms and the relation between the psychic and the social; the persistent influence of Foucauldian notions of biopower to explain the politics of subject formation and new forms of governmentality; histories of intimacy, domesticity, and private life; the cultural politics of everyday life; histories and theories of sensation and touch informed by phenomenology and cultural geography.⁵ Although each of these projects has its own specificities and reference points, their collective critical mass is considerable.

I have to confess that I am somewhat reluctant to use the term *af-*

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tive turn because it implies that there is something new about the study of affect when in fact, as the list above suggests, this work has been going on for quite some time. In a narrower sense, the affective turn has been signifying a body of scholarship inspired by Deleuzian theories of affect as force, intensity, or the capacity to move and be moved.⁶ Crucial to such inquiry is the distinction between affect and emotion, where the former signals precognitive sensory experience and relations to surroundings, and the latter cultural constructs and conscious processes that emerge from them, such as anger, fear, or joy.⁷ This terminology has helped to loosen the hegemony of psychoanalysis as the way to describe emotional experience, although Freud has his own version of *affect* as undifferentiated energy or feeling, especially in his early writings on the hydraulic model of psychic energy.⁸ Deleuzian projects have also enabled a fuller vocabulary for accounts of sensory experience that have emerged from cultural studies of embodiment and the turn away from Cartesian splits between body and mind. But this larger project extends well beyond the rubric of one theoretical source.

Thus, although the Deleuzians are intimates and fellow travelers of the Public Feelings interest in sensory experience and feeling, my own project has not been shaped by that tradition.⁹ I tend to use *affect* in a generic sense, rather than in the more specific Deleuzian sense, as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways (whether as distinct specific emotions or as a generic category often contrasted with reason)—but with a wary recognition that this is like trying to talk about *sex* before *sexuality*. I also like to use *feeling* as a generic term that does some of the same work: naming the undifferentiated “stuff” of feeling; spanning the distinctions between emotion and affect central to some theories; acknowledging the somatic or sensory nature of feelings as experiences that aren’t just cognitive concepts or constructions. I favor *feeling* in part because it is intentionally imprecise, retaining the ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences. It also has a vernacular quality that lends itself to exploring feelings as something we come to know through experience and popular usage and that indicates, perhaps only intuitively but nonetheless significantly, a conception of mind and body as integrated. Public Feelings takes seri-

ously questions like “How do I feel?” and “How does capitalism feel?” as starting points for something that might be a theory but could also be a description, an investigation, or a process. Terms such as *affect*, *emotion*, and *feeling* are more like keywords, points of departure for discussion rather than definition. We have used the term *project*, as in “Public Feelings project,” to signify an open-ended and speculative inquiry that fans out in multiple directions, including new forms of writing that are “essays” in the literal sense of an experiment.¹⁰

In a more general way, though, the term *affective turn* does signal the cumulative force of Public Feelings projects and their commitment to new forms of cultural studies, especially those that are not just confined to ideology critique, as important as that remains. For some time now, there have been calls to think beyond the well-worn grooves of the search for forms of cultural management and hegemony, on the one hand, and modes of resistance and subversion, on the other. One of our most crucial touchstones has been Eve Sedgwick’s articulation of a reparative rather than paranoid critical approach.¹¹ Drawing on the theoretical resources of Melanie Klein and Sylvan Tompkins, but also the model of queer aesthetic practices, Sedgwick works creatively from an eclectic range of materials, including accounts of her own feelings. We have also been influenced by the critical sensibility of our Public Feelings colleague Kathleen Stewart, who for many years has been talking about following the surfaces and textures of everyday life rather than exposing the putative realities of underlying structures.¹² The practice of criticism has not always caught up with these important invocations to alternative modes of criticism, but Public Feelings has sought to craft new critical practices through attention to feelings as both subject and method.

With its emphasis on identities and public cultures that cultivate non-normative affects, queer theory has also been a crucial resource for Public Feelings and its version of the affective turn. Especially important have been models for the depathologization of negative feelings such as shame, failure, melancholy, and depression, and the resulting rethinking of categories such as utopia, hope, and happiness as entwined with and even enhanced by forms of negative feeling.¹³ The Public Feelings project resists pastoralizing or redemptive accounts of negative feeling that seek to convert it into something useful or posi-

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tive, but it also embraces categories such as utopia and hope. In this respect, its work contributes to debates on the antisocial thesis that have dominated queer theory over the past decade, but it ultimately resists reductive binarisms between the social and the antisocial and between positive and negative affect, as well as paranoid critical tendencies that are on the lookout for premature forms of utopia or futurity or that presume the superiority of negative affect.¹⁴ It rethinks distinctions between positive and negative feelings so as not to presume that they are separate from one another or that happiness or pleasure constitutes the absence or elimination of negative feeling. Depression, for example, can take antisocial forms such as withdrawal or inertia, but it can also create new forms of sociality, whether in public cultures that give it expression or because, as has been suggested about melancholy, it serves as the foundation for new kinds of attachment or affiliation. Binary divisions between positive and negative affects don't do justice to the qualitative nuances of feeling that are only crudely captured by such designations. Queer theory's focus on negative affect has created some of the same kind of sparring generated by the antisocial thesis, although such criticism sometimes seems to miss the persistently reparative and dialectical dimensions of much of this work.¹⁵

The queer predilection for negative affect and the virulence of debates about the antisocial owe something to the turn that mainstream lesbian and gay politics has taken toward homonormativity and queer neoliberalisms.¹⁶ Like the social movements of the 1970s, the queer activism of the 1990s has had its own share of political disappointments, as radical potential has mutated into assimilationist agenda and left some of us wondering how domestic partner benefits and marriage equality became the movement's rallying cry. As a queer project, *Public Feelings* tries to reimagine a liberatory version of social and affective relations beyond the liberal versions that have come to dominate the public sphere of gay politics. Discussions of political depression emerge from the necessity of finding ways to survive disappointment and to remind ourselves of the persistence of radical visions and ways of living. Rather than a paranoid watch for how forms of resistance are ultimately co-opted, it's more about noticing and describing the places where it feels like there is something else happening, and passing on strategies for survival. Survival also involves developing a higher tol-

erance for the conflicts that political life invariably produces—such as those between lesbian separatist and trans communities, gay marriage and antimarriage camps, or antisocial and utopian tendencies—so that groups don't implode or splinter into factions. (But tolerance not in the liberal sense of putting up with conflict or difference, but in the sense of being receptive to them and being willing to risk vulnerability.)

The linkage between depression and political failure is relevant not just to queer politics; it also pertains to the politics of race in the wake of the incomplete projects of civil rights and decolonization. The limits of political representation and legal recognition in eliminating racism require not only new visions for the future but the affective energy to sustain disappointment. The turn to public cultures of memory that address transnational histories of genocide, colonization, slavery, and diaspora stems from the need to connect with histories of trauma that have not yet been overcome.¹⁷ Epidemics of depression can be related (both as symptom and as obfuscation) to long-term histories of violence that have ongoing impacts at the level of everyday emotional experience. A depressive antisociality can accompany an insistence that the past is not over yet, as well as efforts to address some of the murkier dimensions of everyday racial experience for which identity politics is not always an adequate container. The Public Feelings project intersects with studies of race and ethnicity that consider how to think psychic and social life together, the use of melancholy as a historical and racialized category, and the production of hope in the face of long histories of oppression.¹⁸ Public Feelings participates in the ongoing impact of identity politics, as well as efforts to build intersectional and comparative forms of analysis that do justice to the grief, rage, hope, and patience that attend these projects both scholarly and political. Political depression is pervasive within recent histories of decolonization, civil rights, socialism, and labor politics, and attention to affective politics is a way of trying to come to terms with disappointment, failure, and the slowness of change; it is a politics that comes from remaining patient with the moments before and after so-called revolution, even as it also looks for the utopian uprising and outburst. Public Feelings is about rethinking activism in ways that attend to its emotional registers, including the frustrations that come from trying to keep activism and scholarship together.

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Feminism as Affective Turn

The affective turn also doesn't seem particularly new to me because the Public Feelings project represents the outcome of many years of engagement with the shifting fortunes of the feminist mantra that "the personal is the political" as it has shaped theoretical and political practice and their relation to everyday life. Many of our members are part of a generation that was schooled in the feminist theory of the 1980s, which emerged in universities that were no longer connected to a strong movement-based feminism and hence was more focused on specifically academic questions and institutional change. We were taught to be suspicious of essentialisms, including those associated with affect, such as the idea that women are naturally more emotional than men or that emotional expression is inevitably liberatory. Feelings were nevertheless at the heart of this theoretically informed scholarship, including projects on emotional genres, such as the gothic, the sentimental, the sensational, and the melodramatic, and sophisticated accounts of the history of emotions, the relation between private and public spheres, and the construction of interiority, subjectivity, embodiment, and intimate life.¹⁹ To put it in shorthand, the feminism of Virginia Woolf and "a room of one's own" was joined by the feminism of Harriet Beecher Stowe and domestic economy; feminists turned their attention from Mary Wollstonecraft and the political treatise to Jane Austen and a more covert politics of drawing-room manners and the intimate public sphere documented in the novel. Rather than feeling drawn to search for and recover neglected feminist heroines, my generation of feminist scholars emphasized the social power of popular and denigrated cultural genres ranging from the conduct book to the novel. Influenced by poststructuralist theory, especially Foucault, and focusing on gender more than on women, we emphasized that the social power of women's genres, which frequently trafficked in powerful emotional experiences both in the text and for their readers, was not always feminist and could be attached to consolidating and sustaining middle-class power and promoting imperialist, nationalist, and racist agendas.

An important agenda for Public Feelings, then, has been what Lauren Berlant calls the "unfinished business of sentimentality," which can refer not only to the persistence of sentimental culture itself but also to the way that feminist critiques of sentimentality have not yet fully been

taken up in the public sphere.²⁰ For example, the models of sentimental representation that pervade eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses of abolition are relevant for understanding contemporary human rights discourses that still traffic in the generation of affect through representations that aim to touch their audiences.²¹ While abolition is sometimes acknowledged to be an early discourse of human rights, the history of human rights is frequently told as though it begins with the Universal Declaration as a response to the Second World War. Moreover, the popular origins of this highly sanctioned form of emotional politics need to be more fully acknowledged so as to better explain its tensions and failures. In contexts ranging from the testimony of truth and reconciliation commissions, to Amnesty International reports, to documentary films that explore human rights abuses, liberal models by which the representation of suffering is presumed to have a salutary effect on an audience that is removed culturally and geographically (but connected by representation and global economies) are pervasive. There are many different variations on these strategies, but they rarely include a critical perspective on the presumed transparency of representation that is commonly found in feminist scholarship on affect. In continuing to explore the connections between emotion and politics that have been a long-standing concern for feminism, *Public Feelings* seeks to craft new forms of feminist intellectual politics that are still lacking in the public sphere.²²

Feminist cultural critique has also been careful to scrutinize overly simplistic models of gender identity and the way that the privileges of class, race, or other categories complicate personalist stories of oppression and require that they be carefully situated. Alongside such critiques, the personal voice has persisted as an important part of feminist scholarship, enabled, if not also encouraged, by theory's demand that intellectual claims be grounded in necessarily partial and local positionalities. The *Public Feelings* project builds on these lessons and strategies in an effort to bring emotional sensibilities to bear on intellectual projects and to continue to think about how these projects can further political ones as well. As we have learned to think both more modestly and more widely about what counts as politics so that it includes, for example, cultural activism, academic institutions, and everyday and domestic life, it has become important to take seriously the institutions where we live (as opposed to always feeling like politics is somewhere

else out there) and to include institutional life in our approaches to intellectual problems. At this point, theory and affect are not polarized or at odds with one another, and Public Feelings operates from the conviction that affective investment can be a starting point for theoretical insight and that theoretical insight does not deaden or flatten affective experience or investment.²³

One origin for the Public Feelings group was reflection on feminist futures catalyzed by the impending twentieth anniversary of the controversial Scholar and Feminist conference on Sexuality in 1982 at Barnard College.²⁴ It seems appropriate that Public Feelings would emerge out of a return to a divisive and emotional moment in feminist sexual politics, one fraught with the question of whether dichotomies between pleasure and danger can be strictly maintained. The presumption that sex-positivity does not necessarily mean nice sex and that the queer messiness of sexuality has important political implications remains an important legacy. This history is an important starting point for thinking about the politics of affect within the longer history of feminism (including the relation between first-wave feminisms and women's genres) and its deep-seated wish, as manifest in practices of consciousness-raising, that emotional expression lead to good politics. The sex wars of the 1980s have also been formative for Public Feelings because they are such a powerful example of political conflict, which has been especially vexing for feminist ideals of sisterhood. Academic feminism in the 1980s was forged from tensions around sexuality, race, and essentialism, and my ongoing fascination with the negative feelings of political dispute has led me to a reparative perspective that embraces conflict rather than separating out right from wrong, whether generational, racial, sexual, or theoretical. Some thirty years after the publication of formative books such as *The Madwoman in the Attic* and *Women and Madness*, both of which I might once have critiqued for romanticizing the madwoman, it is interesting to find myself writing a book about depression that begins from my own (female) experience to imagine how mental health might be reconstructed (and not just for women but for everyone).²⁵ As part of the project of Public Feelings, this book rethinks the 1980s critique in order to establish a new rapprochement with legacies of 1970s feminism such as consciousness-raising, personal narrative, and craft.

Keywords: A Note on Method

In the methodological spirit of cultural studies, *Public Feelings* takes up *depression* as a keyword in order to describe the affective dimensions of ordinary life in the present moment. Such an investigation emerges from important traditions of describing *how capitalism feels*, but it also puts pressure on those left-progressive projects not to rush to meta-commentary. This project has been present in the rethinking of modernity by Walter Benjamin, George Simmel, and others that focuses on the felt sensations of the lived environment, especially the city; the British cultural studies work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall that understands culture as a “way of life” and “a structure of feeling” and has flexible models for understanding how everyday experience is a manifestation of social life; the anthropology and sociology of Kathleen Stewart, Michael Taussig, Nadia Seremetakis, and Avery Gordon that focuses on sensation, tactility, and feelings.²⁶ In this tradition of thinking, accounts of sensory experience are important for understanding the present (and its histories), and they resist what have sometimes been overly reductive models within Marxist theory for analyzing the mechanisms of social change. Moreover, the focus on sensation and feeling as the register of historical experience gives rise to new forms of documentation and writing, whether in the aphorisms and spiritual materialism of Benjamin, the modular writing of Taussig, the creative nonfiction of Stewart, or the turn to fictional forms of thinking in Gordon. Their varied writing practices often turn the ordinary into the scene of surprise, and they slow down so as to be able to immerse themselves in detail and to appreciate the way that magic and mystery sit alongside the banal and the routine.

The documentation of everyday life is not just an end in itself, however. The richer accounts of the ordinary sought by the *Public Feelings* projects are also new ways of providing the more systemic accounts of power that have been central to cultural studies. Depression, or alternative accounts of what gets called depression, is thus a way to describe neoliberalism and globalization, or the current state of political economy, in affective terms. Lisa Duggan suggests that neoliberal economic and social policy is characterized by the shrinking of the public sphere and that affective life is forced to bear an increasing burden as the state divests itself of responsibility for social welfare and affective life is con-

fined to a privatized family.²⁷ Depression can be seen as a category that manages and medicalizes the affects associated with keeping up with corporate culture and the market economy, or with being completely neglected by it. Alain Ehrenberg suggests that the discourse of depression emerges in response to the demand that the self become a sovereign individual defined by the ability to create distinctive projects and agendas; those who fail to measure up to this demand through lack of will, energy, or imagination are pathologized as depressed.²⁸ The neoliberal management of racial conflicts and differences through policies of multiculturalism and diversity cultivates certain affects of polite recognition at the expense of really examining the explosiveness of racialized histories. What gets called depression in the domestic sphere is one affective register of these social problems and one that often keeps people silent, weary, and too numb to really notice the sources of their unhappiness (or in a state of low-level chronic grief—or depression of another kind—if they do).

Looking at neoliberalism from the vantage point of everyday affective life offers, however, an alternative approach to master narratives about global conditions that are currently circulating in cultural studies. Talk of permanent war, states of exception, and new security states, important and useful as it might be, frequently operates at such a high level of abstraction that it fails to address the lived experience of these systemic transformations.²⁹ Although it shares some of the same impulses that lead to these large conceptual categories—a desire to track the histories of the present so as to provide critical insight about current conditions and help in planning for the future—the Public Feelings project aims to find new ways of articulating the relation between the macro and the micro and new forms of description that are more textured, more localized, and also less predictably forgone in their conclusions about our dire situation. My emphasis on depression as ordinary represents an effort to describe the present through attention to the felt experience of everyday life, including moments that might seem utterly banal in comparison with the moments of shock or ordinary extraordinariness that can be found in modernists such as Benjamin and Woolf, both of whom are important theorists and writers of the ordinary.

One mark of this difference in approach is the way that Public Feelings works with the tradition of the keyword, significantly popularized by Raymond Williams as a way of making Marxist concepts more

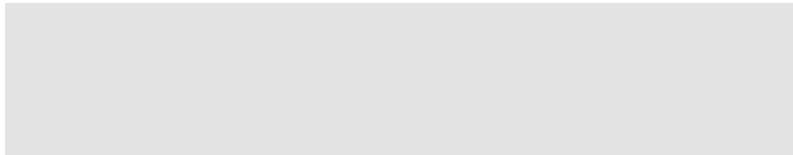
readily accessible for cultural analysis.³⁰ Part of a tradition of Marxist thinking that has aimed to refine models of capitalism by developing critical categories that can account for the present, terms such as *post-modernism* and *postcolonialism* have been updated or replaced by terms such as *globalization*, *transnationalism*, and *diaspora*, and more recently *neoliberalism*. The notion of the keyword has been central to the work of Public Feelings, but we have often replaced definitions of the *Zeitgeist* or traditional theoretical categories such as *ideology* and *culture* with terms such as *rest*, *impasse*, and *sentimentality* that might not seem as wide-ranging in their explanatory power but which nonetheless provide entry points into social and cultural analysis.³¹ Williams's suggestive notion of a structure of feeling (generative in part because of its sketchiness) opens the way for affective terms, such as *depression*, to become keywords, nodes of speculation that offer new ways to think about contemporary culture.

Public Feelings generates an expanded set of keywords in part because, in addition to its Marxist lineages, the project is also influenced by queer and feminist work that keeps categories of gender and sexuality central to investigations of the war front and governmentality and hence looks to sometimes unexpected sites of analysis in order to see their effects. Depression is another manifestation of forms of bio-power that produce life and death not only by targeting populations for overt destruction, whether through incarceration, war, or poverty, but also more insidiously by making people feel small, worthless, hopeless. It is another form of the "slow death" that Berlant attributes to the seemingly epidemic spread of obesity, but one that takes the form not of bodies expanding to the point of breakdown, but of an even less visible form of violence that takes the form of minds and lives gradually shrinking into despair and hopelessness.³² New conceptual categories and new modes of description are necessary to capture these feelings.

This project's inquiry into depression, then, is also about new ways of doing cultural studies that move past the work of critique or the exposure of social constructions. Although I explore the history of depression as a cultural discourse and the pervasive and widespread contemporary representation of it as a medical disease that can be treated pharmacologically, this book is not primarily a critique of that discourse. Instead, I seek to use depression as an entry point into a different kind of cultural studies, one with an interest in how we might track

affective life in all its complexity and in what kinds of representations might do justice to its social meanings.

In investigating the productive possibilities of depression, this book aims to be patient with the moods and temporalities of depression, not moving too quickly to recuperate them or put them to good use. It might instead be important to let depression linger, to explore the feeling of remaining or resting in sadness without insisting that it be transformed or reconceived. But through an engagement with depression, this book also finds its way to forms of hope, creativity, and even spirituality that are intimately connected with experiences of despair, hopelessness, and being stuck. Under the rubric and inspiration of Public Feelings, it hopes to spend some time with the word *depression* in order to generate new forms of cultural studies and new public discourses about feelings.



KEYWORD DEPRESSION

I'd like to be able to write about depression in a way that simultaneously captures how it feels and provides an analysis of why and how its feelings are produced by social forces. I'm interested in how, for many of us (an "us" that includes a range of social positions and identities in need of specification), everyday life produces feelings of despair and anxiety, sometimes extreme, sometimes throbbing along at a low level, and hence barely discernible from *just the way things are*, feelings that get internalized and named, for better or for worse, as depression. It is customary, within our therapeutic culture, to attribute these feelings to bad things that happened to us when we were children, to primal scenes that have not yet been fully remembered or articulated or worked through. It's also common to explain them as the result of a biochemical disorder, a genetic mishap for which we shouldn't blame ourselves. I tend to see such master narratives as problematic displacements that cast a social problem as a personal problem in one case and

as a medical problem in the other, but moving to an even larger master narrative of depression as socially produced often provides little specific illumination and even less comfort because it's an analysis that frequently admits of no solution. Saying that capitalism (or colonialism or racism) is the problem does not help me get up in the morning.

Thus I've been looking for forms of testimony that can mediate between the personal and the social, that can explain why we live in a culture whose violence takes the form of systematically making us feel bad. Ideally, I'd like those forms of testimony to offer some clues about how to survive those conditions and even to change them, but I'd also settle for a compelling description, one that doesn't reduce lived experience to a list of symptoms and one that provides a forum for feelings that, despite a widespread therapeutic culture, still haven't gone public enough. It's a task that calls for performative writing, and I'm not sure I know what that would look like or, even if I did, whether I'm up to the task of producing it. Some years ago I began this project with the following statement, a rant about the inadequacies of both pharmaceutical cures and the available public discourse, including memoirs, that cast depression as either utterly mysterious or a manageable, if chronic, medical problem.³³ It's a call to memoir that I'm still trying to answer.

Depression Manifesto

This is my version of a Prozac memoir, bad connotations included. But I want to write it precisely because I don't believe in Prozac. No, I think it's a scam, even if that makes me one of those quacks, like the people who don't believe that the HIV virus causes AIDS. Discussions about the biochemical causes of depression might be plausible, but I find them trivial. I want to know what environmental, social, and familial factors trigger those biological responses—that's where things get interesting. A drug that masks the symptoms of a response to a fucked-up world or a fucked-up life doesn't tell me anything. I want to hear about the people like me who've decided not to take drugs.

But in addition to writing a polemic against drugs, I also want to write about depression because my own experiences of it have been so unexpected and so intense, the sensations so invisible and yet so spectacular, that I feel compelled to honor them with description. I want to know how it

was that not just my mind but my body experienced such excruciatingly bad feelings. But also such excruciatingly *ordinary* bad feelings insofar as during the most extreme bouts I was overwhelmed by a sense of how easy it was to get there—the slide into numbness was brought on by such common events as moving, breaking up with someone, trying to finish a book, starting a new job. Huge life transitions, yes, but also ones that, in my culture at least, are an inevitable part of growing up, of learning to take care of oneself, of facing the fear of being alone. I want to say something about that state that satisfies me in a way that all those bestsellers don't because they make depression seem so clinical, so extreme, so pathological, so alien. Why do these accounts not call my name? What name am I trying to call?

I think I can only know why I want to talk about depression by describing it. *What* before *why*. My own experience is the antidote to all of those other descriptions I've read, whether in theory, or pop psychology, or memoirs. Have I read anything that I liked? That moved me? That seemed true enough to haunt me? No. Then I'll have to make it up myself.

Over the course of a number of years, I wrote, although often with a sense of secrecy and writerly inadequacy. My desire to write a depression memoir has been fraught with ambivalence because of the problematic place of memoir within therapeutic culture, where it has a tendency to circulate in sensationalizing and personalizing ways that don't lend themselves to the social and political analysis that I'm looking for. Equally controversial is memoir's place in academia, where its developing status as a forum for new kinds of criticism has also been met with skepticism about its scholarly value. At the same time, memoir has allowed me to circumvent the resistance I've often encountered to a critique of antidepressants, which some people take very personally—I can simply speak for myself by offering my own case history. Although for the sake of manifesto or emotional outburst it might seem otherwise, I'm not against pharmaceuticals for those who find they work. I myself don't find medical explanations of depression's causes satisfying, but I do understand that many people find them helpful either for themselves or for family members because it relieves them of debilitating forms of responsibility and self-blame. I do, though, want to complicate biology as the endpoint for both explanations and solutions, causes and effects.

The book that grew out of this initial writing and ongoing experi-

ment with process combines memoir and criticism in order to explore what each genre can offer to public discourse about depression. I found that neither on its own was satisfactory. Although the critical essay, the genre with which I have the most familiarity and skill, had much to offer, it also felt like it had some limits. If I wrote about depression in the third person without saying anything about my personal experience of it, it felt like a key source of my thinking was missing. Memoir became one of my research methods, a starting point and crucible for exploring my ideas about depression, an opportunity to figure out what kind of case history might have the richness and nuance I was looking for by actually creating one, and a way of presenting my understanding of depression as emerging from my ongoing daily experience.

At the same time, I couldn't accomplish everything I wanted to do in the genre of the memoir. There were too many other things I wanted to say, too much context that could not have been incorporated without breaking the frame of the memoir itself. Some readers suggested that I might want to combine the two in order to represent them as mutually constitutive. As attractive as that idea was, I ultimately decided to let the memoir stand alone in order to reflect its status as the first phase of my thinking and because it ended up telling a story that I wanted readers to have access to as a single coherent piece of writing. The end result, then, is a diptych, a narrative that uses two different strategies for writing about depression, with the aim of reflecting on which forms of writing and public discourse are best suited to that task.

On Being Stuck

The first part of this book, and the starting point for my subsequent thinking about depression, is a memoir about the place where I live on a daily basis, academia, 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 corporatization of the university. For those who are fortunate enough to imagine that their careers and other life projects can be meaningfully shaped by their own desires, depression in the form of thwarted ambition can be the frequent fallout of the dreams that are bred by capitalist culture—the pressure to be a successful professional, to have a meaningful job, to juggle the conflicting demands of work and