

## DEPRESSION: A PUBLIC FEELING

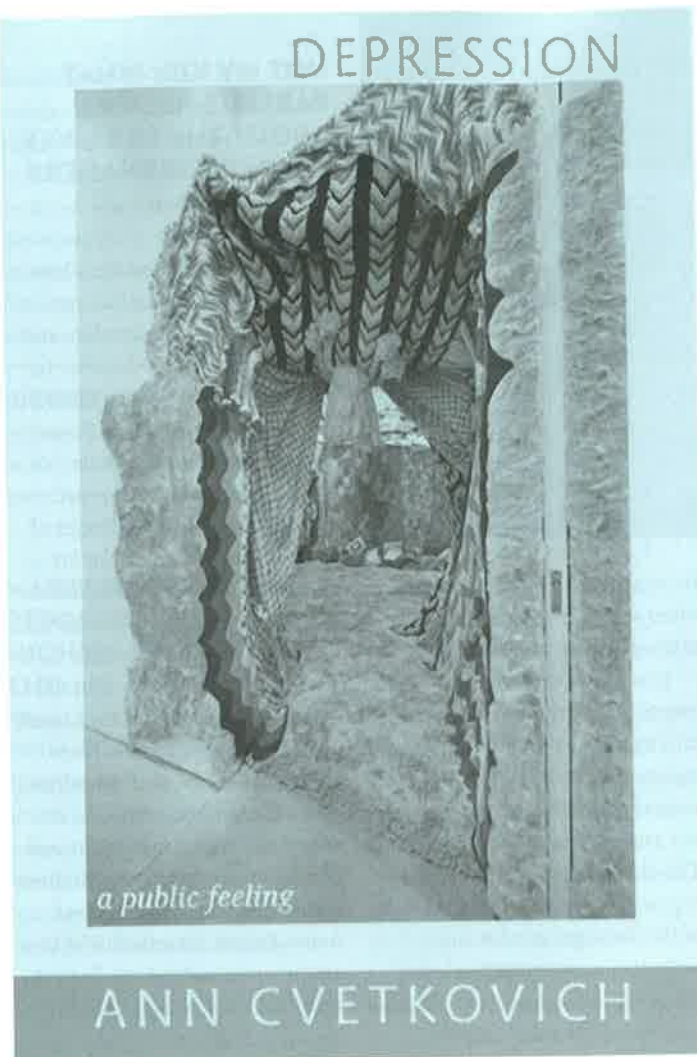
Ann Cvetkovich

{DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS}

What if depression is not an isolated medical condition treatable through diagnosis and drugs, but instead a collective phenomena whose roots lie in social, cultural, and political dislocation? Ann Cvetkovich, a professor of women's and gender studies at the University of Texas–Austin, unpacks this concept in her “queer academic self-help book,” *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Half memoir, half speculative academic essay, *Depression* grew out of Cvetkovich's work with the Public Feelings Group, a collective of scholars that opposes a fixed divide between emotions and intellect in both academia and activism.

The book begins with Cvetkovich's own “Depression Journals,” a 60-page collection of stories about her struggle to address depression both with medication and ritualistic everyday activity, or what she calls “the sacred everyday.” Cvetkovich's academic contemporaries, as well as mainstream cultural critics and social justice activists, often scorn memoirs, in particular depression memoirs, as self-involved or narcissistic. But she insists that personal storytelling grants us richer language to discuss feelings of political, racial, and social despair.

In the book's second section, Cvetkovich traces how depression has historically been framed, from its spiritual connotations in the fourth century to the secular medical status it holds today. She goes on to explore what depression looks like to people who live outside a patriarchal or capitalist model. “The art of the domestic looks different when it leaves the confines of the normative white middle-class home, [which is] the



breeding ground for what gets classified as depression,” writes Cvetkovich. Black feminist writers Saidiya Hartman and Jacqui Alexander's examination of despair in the diasporic experience, lesbian craft artists Sheila Pepe and Allyson Mitchell's reworked ideas of domesticity in a capitalist society, and cabaret artists Kiki and Herb's satirical modern domestics through cabaret all speak to experiences of depression that are expected to be managed in the privacy of one's home.

At one end, *Depression* is a call to expand how we frame and engage with depression, and at the other it's an internal appeal to academia to accept personal experience as a valid

source material for scholarship. By melding the personal and the academic, Cvetkovich is creating an important new forum for how we discuss depression. Yet the awkwardness of the newborn form is apparent, and at times, exhausting. The material is totally fascinating, but the sheer breadth of cultural and historical narrative in the text could fill several books. *Depression* is an example of its own premise; its very structure illustrates the challenge of integrating personal narratives into a capitalist model that emphasizes scientific knowledge above all. —NINA LARY

**DELVE DEEPER:** Follow up by reading the authors who inspired Cvetkovich to keep going when

she hit rock bottom—Lynda Barry, David Foster Wallace, Audre Lorde, and Eileen Myles. (See epilogue for specific works.)

## CROSSINGS

Betty Lambert

{ARSENAL PULP PRESS}

When *Crossings* was first published in 1979, William French wrote in *The Globe and Mail* that it was “the kind of a novel that feminists will applaud because the central male character, Mik O'Brien, is an almost grotesque model of the male chauvinist, who glories in the power of his penis and uses it to dominate, reward, and punish his women.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, French was wrong: Many readers saw this portrayal of Mik, and of his violent relationship with protagonist Vicky, not as rebuke but as endorsement of abuse. Betty Lambert's first (and only) novel found itself banned from some feminist bookstores and subsequently forgotten.

After more than 20 years out of print, *Crossings* has been reissued in honor of the 125th birthday of Vancouver, Canada. The novel, set in British Columbia in the early 1960s, is a searing, intimate account of the unrelentingly abusive relationship between Vicky, a bright and intellectual writer, and Mik, a violent and controlling logger. It's a thorny and unsettling relationship: Vicky clearly grasps Mik's manipulative and abusive patterns and acknowledges her own suffering, yet she continues to ache for self-destruction. The territory is uncomfortable—Vicky feels simultaneous disgust and sympathy for Mik—but Lambert never sinks to victim blaming. The occasional line may appear antifeminist (“I'd always read that no one could be raped if she didn't really want to be”), but Lambert's characterization