



An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures

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In this bold new work of cultural criticism, Ann Cvetkovich develops a queer approach to trauma. She argues for the importance of recognizing---and archiving---accounts of trauma that belong as much to the ordinary and everyday as to the domain of catastrophe. Cvetkovich contends that the field of trauma studies, limited by too strict a division between the public and the private, has overlooked the experiences of women and queers. Rejecting the pathologizing understandings of trauma that permeate medical and clinical discourses on the subject, she develops instead a sex-positive approach missing even from most feminist work on trauma. *An Archive of Feelings* challenges the field to engage more fully with sexual trauma and the wide range of feelings in its vicinity, including those associated with butch-femme sex and AIDS activism and caretaking.

An Archive of Feelings brings together oral histories from lesbian activists involved in act/up New York; readings of literature by Dorothy Allison, Leslie Feinberg, Cherrie Moraga, and Shani Mootoo; videos by Jean Carlomusto and Pratibha Parmar; and performances by Lisa Kron, Carmelita Tropicana, and the bands Le Tigre and Tribe 8. Cvetkovich reveals how these cultural formations---activism, performance, and literature---give rise to public cultures that both work through trauma and transform the conditions producing it. By looking closely at connections between sexuality, trauma, and the creation of lesbian public cultures, Cvetkovich makes those experiences that have been pushed to the peripheries of trauma culture the defining principles of a new construction of sexual trauma-one in which trauma catalyzes the creation of cultural archives and political communities.

About the Author: Ann Cvetkovich is Associate Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*.

An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures Details

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Ai Miller says

An incredibly engrossing, quick read--although it's ~300 pages, I finished it in less than a day. Highlights for me included the chapter on butch-femme touch and trauma, and the oral histories of lesbian AIDS activists. Cvetkovich does an incredible broad sweep of a number of lesbian public cultures and readings of things that are really valuable for establishing a framework of how trauma studies might interact with other fields to be truly interdisciplinary. For a book with a somewhat imposing title, I will say this was incredibly accessible, and again- I just couldn't put it down. Looking forward to thinking more about it, and finding ways to think about its framework as related to my own work.

Liz says

I wanted to read this on the strength of the article that later formed the chapter "in the archive of lesbian feelings", which deals explicitly with grassroots queer archives and the differences between grassroots and institutional archives. in this chapter, Cvetkovich claims that queer archives -- considered in the broadest sense as queer individuals' or communities' attachments to objects/artefacts -- are often formed of attachments to seemingly arbitrary or even homophobic things -- like old pulp novels with queer villains. that is, within a homophobic society, where overt queer representation might surface only rarely, the death of the author and the primacy of the reader's interpretation becomes a necessary assumption for psychic survival. that's why all your gay friends insist that louis and harry are totally doing it. what does it mean to preserve queer history when the most important artefacts for queer people -- especially queer women -- often aren't overtly queer in any way? what's the connection between this arbitrariness and the arbitrariness of traumatic associations like PTSD triggers? affective attachment in general? queerness is about feelings. how do you create an archive of feelings? cool question.

I was also really into the chapter on butch/femme identities and sexual practices, particularly the discussion of butch impermeability/imperturbability in Stone Butch Blues as a model of dealing with trauma that doesn't mandate that you "let it all out". I've been thinking a lot lately about how feminist activists and theorists can honour and centre trauma survivors and survival strategies without minimising trauma and violence, casting survivors as fundamentally broken, or, crucially, demanding complete openness to public scrutiny of traumatic experiences, and this was a helpful way to begin thinking about this.

So aspects of this book kind of blew my mind. My major criticism is of the complete absence of trans women. Like, this is a book that's very much about lesbian communities and the lesbian public sphere, and that deals extensively with the question of gatekeeping in lesbian communities, not to mention talking about the fucking Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (notorious for its explicit refusal of entry rights to trans women) in glowing terms. Not every book has to address everything, but in the context of longrunning struggles over the place of trans women in lesbian communities, this absence takes on the character of deliberate erasure.

Laura says

Absolutely amazing. I had read selected chapters from this before and was impressed, but reading the entire book just solidifies my initial reaction. Cvetkovich is a genius, and her ideas have influenced the way I work with trauma and will influence my future scholarship for sure.

Jessica says

love all the parts about the Lesbian Herstory Archives

Sara says

This book has some categorical problems. HOWEVER, it is really excellent (and innovative) with regard to its treatment of trauma and archives. Both very personally and academically impactful.

Max says

I'm frustrated with the effusive praise Cvetkovich repeatedly gives Michfest - she even devotes an entire section to the "controversies" of Michfest without once mentioning that it excludes trans women, which I wouldn't have thought would even be possible - and I'm also a bit uncomfortable with the way she talks about Brandon Teena in the epilogue. So, on the whole, not the most trans-friendly book, but I'm still giving it four stars because it was a really good, really cathartic read. A lot of what she says are things I really, really needed to hear.

Michael says

In *An Archive of Feeling* (2003), Ann Cvetkovich explores trauma through an archive of lesbian artifacts and interviews with lesbians. She is particularly "interested in how these lesbian sites give rise to different ways of thinking about trauma and in particular to a sense of trauma as connected to the textures of everyday experience" (3-4). For Cvetkovich, trauma isn't a single one-time event (such as September 11), but rather part of lived experience. Additionally, part of her goal is to understand trauma as something that can be foundational for public cultures, or "for creating counterpublic spheres rather than evacuating them" (15). Rather than psychologizing or medicalizing trauma, Cvetkovich sees trauma "as a social and cultural discourse that emerges in response to the demands of grappling with the psychic consequences of historical events" (18). Part of this includes, importantly, understanding trauma as not solely a private issue, but rather something that is part of public culture (here, queering the public/private distinction) (32).

Chapter 2 discusses butch-femme writings that "[trouble:] the ease with which negative assumptions about penetration ground a similarly negative sense of trauma that seems to go without saying" (52). Femmes, Cvetkovich argues, are not passive recipients of penetration from their butch partners, but rather active; she notes the impoverished language we have for sexuality and power that leads us to believe there is simply an

active and a passive partner (59). Through public writings, butch-femme cultures have created ways of coping with trauma that isn't supported by dominant culture (81-82). Part of Cvetkovich's project is to question the rather straightforward ways in which standard therapeutic and political responses to trauma have attempted to cure trauma: "no simple prescription . . . can heal it" (117). Chapter 4 explores this in a transnational context, arguing that queering our understanding of trauma allows us to understand that the trauma of immigration does not have to "be 'healed' by a return to the 'natural' nation of origin or assimilation into a new one" (121). Rather, trauma can be a resource for creating new cultures (122).

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss her interviews with lesbians who have worked with AIDS activism. She draws on Laura Brown's work, which describes "*insidious* trauma" as "the ways in which punctual events, such as rape and sexual abuse, are linked to more pervasive and everyday experiences of sexism" (163). Chapter 7 discusses gay and lesbian archives as archives of affect and emotion.

Cvetkovich closes in her epilogue with some broader questions, including asking "Whose feelings count?" in national culture (278). Rather than a liberal, inclusive model that asks that lesbian feelings be included equally with others in national discourse, she in a way asks how feelings count. For example, she'd like to see responses to September 11 that don't respond by trying to heal trauma with dichotomies (us vs. them) and patriotism, but rather transnational responses.

Madeleine says

cvetkovich's text took a while to get started, but after sifting through the first few chapters, it really blew me away. while she begins with a rather repetitive framework, it also helps make the text accessible to those who may have less exposure. i loved several of the chapters in this book though, particularly cvetkovich's really singular analysis of butch-femme relationships in chapter 2, which argues for a necessary convergence of trauma and desire, debasing notions of active/passive binaries. also this text is really incredible as a lesbian archive, and the sheer mass of material that cvetkovich compiles into her archive filled me with so much joy, giving me a long list, beyond the obvious, of folks to read and wonder about. there is a celebration of the lesbian archive here that is lovely in its compilation of such varied forms of affect and existence. i would say though that cvetkovich really does not deal with any potential shortcomings of a purely lesbian analysis and begins her text with an earnest reflection on the Michigan Womyn's Festival--which she takes up later in the text, broadly gesturing to "controversies" but never articulating the festival's binaristic/reactionary/transphobic approach to gender or wondering how that might problematize her argument for an accessible and shared public culture.

Rebecca says

This is really an excellent book, and very teach-able. It, or individual chapters from it could be used in courses on on Holocaust or trauma studies, affect theory, psychoanalytic reading of popular culture, as well as GLBTQ, transnational culture, social movement history, /or gender pop culture more generally. Cvetkovich accessibly presents complicated and nuanced readings of a variety of texts and connects these readings to the way they are part of public cultures of feeling that we all live with.

Although Cvetkovich is not a historian, her chapter on AIDS activism could be very useful for historians who might be interested in the role that emotions play in politics. I thought her work on the archive and the politics of archives was the only weak one (I am usually annoyed by the somewhat dramatic or arch way that

lit people write about "the archive" because they read Foucault or Derrida, even if they don't have extensive experience actually using archives or doing historical research. Historians might induce similar annoyance if they started writing about the importance of "the metaphor" or some other basic literary term.) That aside, her work on messy feelings that disrupt easier activist narratives, whether they are about incest survival, butch-femme experience, or even the Holocaust, is vital and important.

Eve says

an important look at trauma from a queer/lesbian perspective. it was very affirming to the ways in which trauma has positive effects within personal and cultural contexts, as well as the negative and the neutral. some of the oral history stuff was really fascinating, and told stories rarely heard even in queer contexts. i had not considered the feelings created by the trauma of AIDs with regards carers and particularly queer/lesbian carers, and the consequent effect on the community's trauma narrative. it was interesting to me as an activist to hear accounts of activism as both healing and as a traumatic event in itself, that rings very true. the urgency of AIDs activism, and the death inherently entwined in AIDs activism was made apparent through testimony of those within the movement, with both survivor guilt and loss as major themes. i learned of cultural texts that i had not heard of, and will be looking up. particularly interesting was the way in which the author explored intersectional traumas throughout, and also the queer ways of looking at trauma that were explored within texts. i especially enjoyed discussions around a film that was made about the death of somebody's dog, and queer ways of loving including love for animals as a source of familial love. discussions around whether mainstreaming traumatic narratives was a strengthening or a weakening of feelings archives occurred, and was a debate worth having. i have never read anything like this before, and i am glad i did. at times it was very academic and i struggled through bits of it, but it was well worth the effort.

Anjali says

In parts I think this book is fantastic, gorgeous, and amazingly done... then at times I get frustrated and think there are so many fissures and incomplete sentences.

I guess my main issues would be (1) the use of trauma as an analytic category without a clear context for how she is talking about power... namely, who has more access to trauma? and correspondingly (2) do we try to then describe the shape of oppression through the lens of trauma-- doesn't this pathologize race, gender, sexual, class oppressions? relegate these experiences to the realm of the psyche? and (3) um, what about dealing with race?

but the book, even still, is innovative and provocative and i like the interdisciplinarity of it!

TJ says

An Archive of Feelings opens with gushing praise for Le Tigre/Kathleen Hanna and Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which meant that I was wondering from page one if I could take seriously a work about trauma that is brazenly uncritical of sites of significant transmisogynistic trauma such as MichFest. Especially when it casts those sites as arenas where some rituals of healing for (a certain kind of) lesbian

trauma survivor can occur. Cvetkovich describes a scene at trans woman exclusionary MichFest in which audience members mosh gleefully while Lynn Breedlove, wearing a dildo, 'castrates' herself on stage. I felt nauseous reading Cvetkovich's insistence that this performance held healing power for survivors of sexual trauma. It's hard for me to read the performance of 'mock castration' in a trans woman exclusionary space as anything other than a violent show of transmisogyny. Cvetkovich even included photos for us, and I felt extra, extra nauseous reading the caption to one of them: 'Let's play gang castrate.' This work is an archive, sure, but a limited one, and one that excludes many lesbians.

Aside from the transmisogyny, I was consistently underwhelmed by her analysis. She often seemed to be offering little more than a synopsis of the texts and films included in the work, and maybe that was just the book performing the work of the archive, but in any case it wasn't the most engaging reading. I just wanted more! Instead she'd move on from a piece of analysis just as I was ready to like, hear what she really had to offer me from it. In amassing an archive, here, something was lost, and I don't know if it necessarily had to be that way.

An Archive of Feelings is at its best with its oral history, which is a little funny given Cvetkovich's ambivalence toward oral history itself. But the project of documenting the lives of lesbians involved with ACT UP and their contributions during the crisis years of AIDS is so important. I still wish she'd done better, but I have to credit her some for having done it at all. It was clearly a failing that she only interviewed one woman of color, and no lesbians of color, and it left a sour taste in my mouth that she tried to excuse herself for this by highlighting that she interviewed some Jewish women and some women from working class backgrounds. She wrote that she thought "some of the pitfalls of ethnographic research could be avoided by sticking close to home [Manhattan] and interviewing people like me," but she doesn't go on to explain what these 'pitfalls' are, and it feels like a weird excuse to not even try to include voices of people who *aren't* 'like her' in a way that is non-tokenizing and as true to their experiences as they possibly can be, filtered through her ethnographic standpoint. I mean, throwing your hands up and saying 'I can't!' because you're a white researcher and thus excluding lesbians of color from your oral history project is just as much of a 'pitfall' as mishandling their histories. Right? She frames interviewing Marina Alvarez as a 'risk,' which is gross, and then uses Alvarez's one interview to claim that "Alvarez debunked any presumption that ACT UP was exclusionary by enthusiastically claiming a sense of kinship." Sounds like you're making a big claim out of one WOC's experience, Cvetkovich. I'm sure she would have found testimonies to the counter if she'd looked a little harder for them, but I have a feeling she didn't want to find them.

There was still a lot that was fascinating about the oral histories, as limited as they were. I especially liked that she didn't see interpersonal relations and dynamics as historically insignificant, and really loved reading about romantic relationships formed between ACT UP's gay men and lesbian women. The last chapter, which dealt most directly with archives, was one of the stronger chapters, too. It was a nice mini-history of gay and lesbian archives, especially the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and her writing about the importance of ephemera for gay and lesbian archives was great.

I don't even know how to tackle the epilogue, it was a bit of a mess and nicely (awfully) bookended the transmisogyny in the introduction. I mean, the whole thing is a great example of that tendency in lesbian communities to ""accept"" trans men in that fucked up, backwards way they do -- at least recognizing their existence and humanity. Like, even if Cvetkovich was sorta subtly 'claiming' Brandon Teena as a lesbian, she was at least recognizing the trauma of his death. That is much more than can be said of her position of absolute silence towards the existence of trans women. In context, her silence becomes sinister.

Ezra says

ok, at first reading I was excited about this book but wished it was less academic language. now I'm working on this project that is about queer archives and yiddish archives and this book is SO HELPFUL and relevant so yay I'm so glad this book exists!

Laura says

I decided to check this book out, after reading about how an article by Cvetkovich helped to inspire Le Tigre to write the song "Keep On Living".

This book deals with the many intersections between the queer community and the current discussions in trauma theory. It especially delves into issues with "confessing" versus "witnessing", and how the queer community's experiences with coming out create a more positive model for trauma survivor's to tell their stories and heal, contrasted with past models from the feminist movement and psychotherapy.

The writing is dense and heavy on theory, and is equally rich in its interpretation of literary and artistic works. I'm into that sort of thing, so I thought it was great. Honestly, this book covers so much ground related to trauma and sexuality that I wouldn't be doing it justice to even pretend to give a full overview. I'll just say that if you're interested in the topic, you should definitely read this book.

Kate says

"To deny sickness and death is to deny the reality of the present."

"Every life is worthy of preservation."
