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An Archive of Feelings @ 20: An interview with Ann Cvetkovich

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mss**Ann Cvetkovich**

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Abstract

Feminist and queer studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich's trailblazing book *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* has had an immense influence on the field of memory studies, inspiring new bodies of scholarship on queerness, trauma, and memory. In this interview, Cvetkovich discusses the impact that some of the book's central concepts have had on the field of memory studies over the last 20 years. Cvetkovich also reflects on the role that *An Archive of Feelings* has had in bringing affect into feminist and queer work on sexuality, intimacy, and everyday life. Furthermore, she reflects on another of her groundbreaking books, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, in which she applies queer cultural analysis to unusual archives and writes critical memoir in order to situate depression as an historical category. The interview closes with Cvetkovich's reflections on her current work on queer Indigenous approaches to trauma.

Keywords

affect, lesbian memory, queer Indigenous, queer memory, trauma

Ana Dragojlovic and C.L. Quinan: *It has now been 20 years since An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures (Cvetkovich 2003) was published, and in these past two decades, it has had an immense influence on the field of memory studies, opening up and inspiring new bodies of scholarship dealing with queerness, trauma, and memory. Can you reflect on the production and uptake of the book? Did you ever envisage it would have such an impact, and what do you see as its most important legacies? Likewise, in what ways have some of your*

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central concepts—for example, lesbian public cultures and queer trauma—also changed and evolved since the book's publication?

Ann Cvetkovich: You are right that I had no idea that people would still be reading *An Archive of Feelings* 20 years later! I am especially gratified that it has been so useful to graduate students as a method book—it has enabled new generations of work on archives, cultural and historical trauma, queer public cultures, and affect studies. I was not sure that any of the specific topics I was exploring—sexual trauma, butch-femme genders, queer migration, HIV/AIDS activism—would be of interest beyond a narrow demographic. So I have been especially glad to see the book enable people to pursue their own apparently eccentric or idiosyncratic topics and to push the envelope to experiment with personal narrative, ethnography of the everyday, unconventional archives, and other creative innovations.

I'm also intrigued to note that, although *An Archive of Feelings* is critical of trauma as a diagnostic category, the concept remains ubiquitous not only in popular approaches to mental health where it has become household vernacular, but in public discussions of historical trauma and cultural memory, which have only become more urgent over the last two decades. I'm happy to have written a book that is in conversation with efforts to deal with the legacy, particularly in the Americas, of slavery, genocide, settler colonialism, and systemic racism. What is the responsibility of the nation-state to the violence that is often at its foundation? What kinds of national memorials can acknowledge past violence? What about reparations (since memory alone without systemic transformation is not enough)? These questions are if anything even more timely, and I continue to learn across various geographies and histories and to ask how queer perspectives can be of use.

Your question about how lesbian public cultures and queer trauma have changed is hard to answer in brief! One shift has been the decline of the lesbian in favor of queer and transgender categories, although *An Archive of Feelings* can remain relevant as a document of a moment in the history of lesbian feminism. Moreover, trauma remains present in queer lives—not only through physical and systemic violence but through pathologizing tendencies—around gender, size, and so on—so that a queer critique that depathologizes and that documents everyday lives is still relevant. In reviewing your special issue, I see also a continuity between my efforts to document any and all forms of sexual and queer trauma, as well as everyday feelings, and expanding forms of public history that not only include queer lives but also transform institutions of cultural memory such as archives, museums, and monuments so as to allow for a queer sensibility that values the tangent, the flamboyant, the eccentric, and that takes seriously affective attachments to all kinds of objects.

I will add that *An Archive of Feelings* was published before there was something that was being called the affective turn, although it was there in my view all along in feminist and then queer work on sexuality, intimacy, and everyday life. (The subtitle of my dissertation, written in the 1980s, was *The Politics of Affect*.) I'm proud to be part of this movement to undo Cartesian splits between body/mind and reason/emotion, which has had ramifications across multiple fields of inquiry—not just affect studies but new materialisms, disability studies, critical race studies, environmental humanities, among others.

AD and CLQ: *It's fascinating to hear that your dissertation was titled "The Politics of Affect!" Given that was back in the 1980s, could you say a bit more about "affect before the affective turn"? For instance, how do you see the development of the affective turn as having been informed by queer methodologies and queer memory? And perhaps as well, how has recent queer scholarship drawn on affect studies to open up onto new and generative questions?*

AC: There was definitely affect before the affective turn! In my case, there were two sources—Foucault and Freud—for my use of the term "affect," and you're right to discern also the presence of what was becoming queer theory. Foucault's "history of sexuality" was a huge influence—and my use of the term affect was intended as a parallel or counterpart to sexuality, so as to claim that

affect, too, has a history—and, equally importantly, a politics. At the time, I considered affect to be a minor offshoot of sexuality, whereas I’ve subsequently come to see it as a category that might encompass sexuality, as well as erotics, similar to the way the term intimacy has operated to create space for multiple forms of the social. Partly because I was studying the nineteenth-century novel (one refuge for theory heads and feminists in English departments), I was very influenced by Eve Sedgwick, as well as DA Miller, two scholars working at the cutting edge of Victorian Studies and creating a foundation for queer theory through their work on the politics of sexuality in the genre of the novel. Both of them went on to produce work that was more explicitly queer, but the early articles that resulted in *Between Men* (Sedgwick, 1985) and *The Novel and the Police* (Miller, 1988) were transformative for me and my generation. Their theoretical work dovetailed with what was going on outside academia—the sex wars and HIV/AIDS activism—and their primary focus on gay male relations expanded what could count as feminist/gender studies.

I was also building on radical sexual politics that first began in (lesbian) feminist cultures and groping for ways to use those tools to talk about feelings. In looking for an umbrella term, one of the main vocabularies came from Freud and psychoanalysis, which along with Marxism was part of the tradition of radical thought that shaped me (doubly so as a scholar of the long nineteenth-century and histories of capitalism). The term affect itself came directly from Freud’s discussions of affect as a kind of energy and of the psychic need for homeostasis to regulate stimulation or excitation. It’s a crude model, perhaps, but in hindsight, I would suggest that it anticipates Deleuzian notions of affect as force, vitality, or intensity. Oddly enough, I dropped the subtitle “Politics of Affect” for the book version of the dissertation, even though the concept remains, because the word affect seemed too technical! And I wanted to keep the vernacular term “feelings” and the concept of “mixed feelings” and ambivalence as the layering of multiple, and even contradictory, feelings.

All of this to say that “turns” don’t come out of nowhere; they always have very long back stories—and in the early stages, the conceptual tools and accompanying keywords or vocabularies may be rather crude or patched together and emerge from non-academic sources. This is also part of the method in *An Archive of Feelings* that I hope remains generative for others—finding ways to invent or create tools for things that you “feel” but that aren’t legitimized. (For more on the back story for the affective turn, see Cvetkovich 2022b.)

Moreover, the affective turn has also been accompanied by an archival turn. *An Archive of Feelings* has also had a lasting impact because it inspired my own version of an archival turn from theory to practice (in the wake of a theoretical critique of conventional institutions and practices). Over the last decade or so, I’ve been researching the current state of queer and LGBTQ archives as mainstream institutions collect in this area, picking up where *An Archive of Feelings* left off with its discussion of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I consider myself to be part of a robust wave of queer scholars doing archival work and was gratified to see Susan Stryker and Juana María Rodríguez, formidable scholars in their own right, acknowledge the inspiration of my book in a *Radical History Review* roundtable on Queering Archives (Cvetkovich et al., 2015) to which we contributed.

AD and CLQ: *Your previous work has offered groundbreaking analysis of art production as queer archival practice and queer art as counter-archive, particularly in relation to photographic objects. Could you reflect a bit on how your writing on the topic has changed over time and how it relates to your current work?*

AC: Well, it’s nice to hear my work described in this way! You’re right that thinking alongside of artists has been central to my practice—and originates with *An Archive of Feelings*—where I discuss Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye’s collaboration on the fictional Fae Richards Photo Archive for the film *The Watermelon Woman* (an early version of Saidiya Hartman’s concept of “critical

fabulation”), Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Joan Nestle’s publications on butch-femme, queer punk band Tribe 8, and Jean Carlomusto’s AIDS activist videos. All of these artists are people I know (or came to know through writing it). At first, it seemed against the rules to acknowledge that because it would be too subjective, but it was also about creating work from where I live. The legendary Tribe 8 show at Michfest that was a touchstone for the book has subsequently featured prominently in *Rise Up* (2004), a documentary film about them. I interviewed AIDS activists Leonard and Carlomusto for the book and have continued to write about their work. I included one of Zoe’s photographs of urban trees at the end of the book without commentary so as to acknowledge the connections if only to myself—to have a visual that expressed in other ways what I was trying to say and to represent the worlds I move in. Nicole Eisenman’s painting is on the cover even though they are not directly discussed in the book because their work has also been a constant companion and part of the dyke scene that shaped my thinking.

An Archive of Feelings emerged through an intuitive process that I would now claim as a method. The book is also an archive of feelings because it includes the people who not only help me think but help me survive, a tribe of lesbian feminist queerdos. In making this method legitimate, I have been helped by José Muñoz who crafted forms of performance ethnography and whose circles have overlapped with mine through artists such as Carmelita Tropicana and Marga Gomez (and later Justin Vivian Bond) and in New York performance scenes where we were often at the same shows and parties. I think it has become more legitimate to write where you live and to be more upfront about it rather than circuitous or apologetic, and I’m glad to see younger scholars, such as Laura Gutiérrez (*Performing Mexicanidad*), Monica Huerta (*Magical Habits*), and Cameron Awkward Rich (*The Terrible We*), to name a few, keep pushing the envelope.

In my case, this method of living and working in conversation with artists has become the foundation for a follow-up to *An Archive of Feelings* (the sequel!) on artists as archivists. The article on Tammy Rae Carland’s and Zoe Leonard’s photographs of objects is the point of departure for my new book about artists in the archive, whose working title is *Feeling My Way Through the Archives*. It has been transformative to realize that it wasn’t just archives (such as Lesbian Herstory Archives) but also artists who were a model for my own archival practices, such as my efforts to develop forms of writing that function like photography or drawing in their descriptions of archival documents.

AD and CLQ: *An Archive of Feelings* was followed by another groundbreaking book *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Cvetkovich, 2012) where your queer cultural analysis of unusual archives situates depression as an historical category and as a cultural and political phenomenon. In thinking about your use of memoir there, could you reflect on how we might apply some of these conceptual and methodological insights to recent social movements?

AC: It’s been interesting to see the connections between the two books unfold over time through their reception—sometimes I view them as separate projects, one on archives, one on affect, each with their own follow-up streams, but they are also entwined, as your description of *Depression* as an archive project suggests. As you note, one way to understand that would be through the book’s use of unusual sources/archives at least from the vantage point of science and clinical practice—arts and culture, as we’ve already touched on, but also histories of acedia and melancholy, Jacqui Alexander and Saidiya Hartman on the afterlives of slavery, meditation, and other “ordinary habits.” And as you also note, I frame memoir, including my own *Depression Journals*, which are included in the book, as a form of documentary evidence—building on theories of trauma and testimony that value subjective and affective experience. I’ve been following this trend for a long time—as it first emerged from queer and feminist practices of collective sharing which made space for the use of memoir as scholarly evidence and method. More recently, I have been inspired by the surge in creative nonfiction, including autotheory, as a genre that often combines memoir with archival and historical research to do innovative cultural work. Examples would include Maggie

Nelson (*Argonauts*), Claudia Rankine (*Citizen*), Cathy Park Hong (*Minor Feelings*), and Billy-Ray Belcourt (2020, *A History of My Brief Body*).

Your query about social movements is intriguing—since I do think new forms of writing that document affective experience and subjective memory push the envelope on the relation between personal narrative and social movements. But there is a tradition here that extends back to folks like Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde (and before that slave narrative) and the impact of collections like *This Bridge Called My Back* (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1981) that have helped shape, for example, the queer and feminist sensibility of the Movement for Black Lives. The documentation of ordinary experience from sexual intimacy to racialized microaggression that is saturated with systemic inequality helps open up arenas for social transformation.

AD and CLQ: *Finally, we know that in your current work, you have been thinking about queer Indigenous approaches to trauma history. We would like to hear your thoughts on some of the recent challenges and efforts to decolonize museums, archives, art, and representation. What creative work do you turn to help work through this project?*

AC: Yes, thanks for asking about this. My move to Canada in 2019 (which was also a return since I was born and raised there) was motivated in part by the politics of reparation in the wake of the calls to action catalyzed by the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission process, and greater awareness of missing and murdered Indigenous women, Indigenous youth suicide, and other ongoing forms of death, as well as forms of reparation such as land back and the resurgence of language and culture. I wanted to see if I could contribute something to this process and also learn from it. The murder of George Floyd and the subsequent waves of protest in the United States had a huge impact in Canada, despite or alongside the effects of the pandemic, and it's been an interesting time to be here.

I'm trying to figure out what role (queer) memory and its cultural genres can play in fostering Indigenous resurgence and countering anti-Black racism (and connecting these two movements). I'm guided by what queer and critical race theory has taught me about the tensions between hope and despair, pessimism and optimism. How do we attend to historical trauma without turning people into "exhibits in the museum of political depression," to quote Billy-Ray Belcourt.

Indeed, artists have continued to be my guides as I sort through cultural activism in relation to archives and museums. I have been writing about artists such as Kent Monkman, who has been curating exhibitions that combine colonialist artifacts with his own decolonial art. Billy-Ray Belcourt's fusion of theory and poetry in his versions of creative nonfiction are also revelatory (along with that of other writers like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (*As We Have Always Done*), Joshua Whitehead (*Johnny Appleseed*), Natalie Diaz (*Postcolonial Love Poem*), Tommy Orange (*There There*), Alicia Elliot (*A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*), Therese Marie Mailhot (*Heart Berries*), Daniel Heath Justice (*Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*)). Many of these artists are queer, and they approach the decolonial process with an attunement to gender diversity, sexual playfulness, and affective irreverence that defines sovereignty in erotic and affective terms as a reclamation of the body and spirit (see Cvetkovich, 2020, 2022a, 2023). This next generation of Indigenous culture makers are my teachers, transforming my own practices and opening paths for others.

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Author biographies

Ann Cvetkovich is currently Professor in the Feminist Institute of Social Transformation at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. She was previously Ellen Clayton Garwood Centennial Professor of English, Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, and founding Director of LGBTQ Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (Rutgers, 1992); *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke, 2003); and *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Duke, 2012). She is writing a book called *Feeling My Way through the Archives* about the current state of LGBTQ archives and the creative use of them by artists to produce counterarchives and interventions in public history. For additional info, see www.anncvetkovich.com.

Ana Dragojlovic is Associate Professor in Gender Studies at the University of Melbourne. She works at the intersection of feminist, queer, postcolonial, and affect theory, and has investigated the intersection of gender and mobility regimes—both historical and contemporary—with a particular focus on how the structural inequalities of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nationality affect the transformation of family and gender relations, forms of care, labor, and subjecthood. Her most recent work in medical humanities draws on feminist, affect, and post-humanist theories, as well as critical trauma studies, to investigate the intergenerational effects of gendered violence. She is the author of *Beyond Bali: Subaltern Citizens and Post-Colonial Intimacy* (Amsterdam University Press 2016), co-author of *Bodies and Suffering: Emotions and Relations of Care* (Routledge, 2018, with Alex Broom), and co-editor of *Gender, Violence, Power: Indonesia across Time and Space* (Routledge, 2020, with Kate McGregor and Hannah Loney).

CL Quinan is Lecturer in Gender Studies in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. Their expertise lies in the fields of queer theory, trans studies, postcolonial studies, and feminist/queer pedagogy, with a particular focus on examining how anxieties around nationality and racial difference come to be transposed onto queer, trans, and gender-diverse bodies and subjectivities. Quinan is the author of the monograph *Hybrid Anxieties: Queering the French-Algerian War and Its Postcolonial Legacies* (University of Nebraska Press, 2020) and co-editor of the volume *Homonationalism, Femonationalism, Ablenationalism: Critical Pedagogies Contextualised* (Routledge, 2022). Their current research intervenes in discussions around recognition, documentation, and mobility for trans and non-binary individuals.