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sad old queers

HEATHER LOVE

Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History

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Heather Love's book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* presents an intervention into recent queer historical and literary scholarship that has explored the affective relationship between the historian and their object of study. Drawing on work by Carolyn Dinshaw, Carla Freccero and Elizabeth Freeman, among others, Love joins an impressive list of scholars who engage with the desires and impulses that propel historical inquiry. For queer historians, the turn to 'affective history' has meant examining the 'vagaries of cross-historical desire and the queer impulse to forge communities between the living and the dead ... [making] explicit the effective stakes of debates on method and knowledge'. (31) Love's particular study, in a similar vein to Christopher Nealon's work on 'foundling' texts, focuses on literature and subjects from that profoundly awkward historical period covering the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century.¹

This awkwardness—prevalent in contemporary attempts to define a queer literary genealogy—manifests in certain texts that exist in the intervening space between the two main paradigm shifts concerning homosexuality. Nealon's collection of works belongs to the uneasy transitional period between the inversion model and the 'ethnic' model of homosexuality. For Nealon, 'foundling' texts, next to canonical works of gay and lesbian literature, can often appear 'adolescent, hapless, literal-minded'.² According to Nealon, this is not a reason to dismiss these works as the flawed prototypes of a better, post-Stonewall future subjectivity, nor to forgive them their flaws and adopt them into

a linear, progressive model of history. Rather, these texts represent the middling space between the two conceptions of queerness, belonging neither to the 'inert, terminal narratives of inversion [nor] to the triumphant, progressive narrative of achieving ethnic coherence'.³ Nealon's texts, in their representational strategies, reflect a temporal experience mired in expectation for a future not yet within reach: an impossible, inaccessible and often unintelligible future, manifested as 'an overwhelming desire to *feel historical*, to convert the harrowing privacy of the inversion model into some more encompassing narrative of collective life'.⁴ The structure of Love's work is highly indebted to Nealon; in fact, they prove to be very complementary texts when read side by side, especially in their mirrored chapters on the work of Willa Cather. But Love's point of departure is also a powerful move away from *Foundlings*. For Nealon, the historical desires of queer readers to make contact with the past—to *be* the future for these foundling queers—is rooted in politics that are profoundly 'big-hearted'. In Love's reading of *Foundlings*, Nealon's work may address the occasionally painful, embarrassed, cringing affect produced by queer history's 'adolescents', but he remains committed to expanding the historical possibilities of these texts. (89) Love's work, while very similar in some respects, is interested in the nastier side of historical affect—cross-historical despair, isolation, sorrow and profound ambivalence—and moves in an entirely different direction: firmly backwards.

The first season of the television series *Six Feet Under* featured David Fisher, the gay

funeral director, and his battle with internalised homophobia. The closeted David comes face to face with a young gay man who was beaten to death in a homophobic attack, and is haunted by the man's bloodied and bruised ghost. The ghost (dis)embodies David's self-hatred, voicing the disgust David feels with himself. No matter how much David fixes the man's corpse—disguising the injuries, restoring the body to beauty—the ghost remains horribly injured, an awful spectre of violence and hate from a past that won't be buried. The ghost appears happy, well and whole again only when David confronts his homophobia. Out of the closet and bravely confrontational, David finally sees the ghost smiling and uninjured; benevolent and proud of David's progression from shame to pride. In this sequence, the nasty past has been redeemed, its dark hold on the present transformed into hope, just as the fatal, brutal injuries on the body were made to disappear under the care of David's reconstructive art. Briefly, the transformation from homophobic violence to homophilic pride leads to the restoration of David's relationship and thus to a better life, more open and honest, and less inflicted with the silence and shame of the closet. To quote Haysi Fantayzee's 1983 hit single, 'Shiny, shiny (bad times behind me)'. However, like Haysi Fantayzee, whose catchy title lyric was constantly underscored by the repetitious chanting of 'No Chance!' Love's book is highly critical of this redemptive, restorative narrative. This sequence represents Love's primary thesis, and her point of critical intervention, in *Feeling Backward*. For Love, the 'history of Western representation is littered

with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants', and these dark representations of same-sex desire—doomed, impossible, tragic, fatal—have proven, in the history of both gay and lesbian liberation and recent queer studies, to be difficult to deal with. (1)

Love ardently rejects the historical and contemporary attempts to incorporate difficult queer stories and subjects into the progressive narrative of liberation. For her, ignoring or denying the significance of 'problem' texts in queer literary history constitutes an affirming practice that can write these texts, and their 'difficult' authors, out of existence. Of course, this tendency is most markedly present in earlier practices of gay and lesbian historical or literary scholarship, where 'affirming the legitimacy' of gay and lesbian existence was the scholarly answer to the call-to-arms of the Stonewall riots. (2) Contemporary queer approaches, on the other hand, have attempted to counter stigma by incorporating it. Love describes the appropriation of the homophobic slur 'queer' by activist groups in the late 1980s and the thorough engagement by theorists with Foucault's notion of reverse discourse as instigating the 'negative turn' in queer and GLBT studies, prompting a new theoretical emphasis on damage, stigma and shame. However, she notes that much of this critical work still depends on a politics of transformation, or at least on the notion of political utility. The term 'queer', according to Judith Butler, has the ability to retain and recall a history of injury; but in order to be useful as a site of political, collective agency, it must be turned and twisted

away from its original meaning and directed toward 'urgent' political purposes. (18) It is as if the origin story of gay liberation, 'the movement from abjection to glorious community', has become 'the underlying structure of the story of coming out of the closet' and thus has come to define both personal and collective liberation. (28) Shame, secrecy, and exclusion contain political utility only in their potential to transform themselves into pride, visibility and community. What to do, then, with historical texts and historical queers that cannot be transformed or rearticulated for these political purposes? What to do with narratives that refuse to look forward to a more hopeful future; that actually insist on looking backward?

The questions Love poses in this work centre around texts and subjects that actively or implicitly refuse the narrative progression of liberation. She focuses on four writers of the pre-Stonewall era (a historical periodisation that is itself under question): Walter Pater, Willa Cather, Radclyffe Hall and Sylvia Townsend Warner. Love gathers these disparate writers under the mantle of 'backward modernism', revealing their representational strategies as steeped in temporal ambivalence. (7) Not only does each of these writers escape the classic modernist definition—they are considered a bit early, or bit too late, for modernism; they are either too sentimental for modernism or ardently anti-modernist—but they are also politically ambivalent for contemporary queer readers. They escape or elude queer identification, or they reject community and embrace isolation, or else their forms of identification

are too depressed (and thus depressing) to be co-opted into a cross-historical community. Love argues that the majority of queer critics tend to read queer subjects from this era 'as isolated and longing for a future community' and that as 'queer readers we tend to see ourselves reaching back toward isolated figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them' by adopting or redeeming them as politically 'useful' antecedents. (8) But what political utility, if any, can be garnered from narratives steeped in despair, or from subjects who reject community in favour of solitude, or from utter failure, rather than rallying success? In focusing on the queer historical experience of failed or impossible love—through Pater's shyness, Cather's isolation, Hall's depression, Warner's failure—and by tracing historical, critical receptions of these works, Love reveals the effects of a prevailing critical attachment to the politics of transformation and the traditional narrative of liberation.

Walter Pater, for example, is a figure often tainted with a certain 'embarrassment', linked as he was to the 'ills of aestheticism: political quietism, withdrawal from the world, hermeticism, nostalgia ... slack relativism, and the elevation of beauty above justice'. (58) In the face of modernist innovation and rebellion, Pater represents the nineteenth-century equivalent of a 'sad old queen' or 'long-suffering dyke': anachronistic, retrograde, depressing. (32) For Love, it is possible to read Pater's withdrawal and 'shrinking resistance' as a failure to adhere to the standards of a modernist political subject, and as not 'a refusal of politics but

rather as a politics of refusal'. (57–8) Love's critique shifts the lens of the political in order to do justice to the felt reality of historical injuries and exclusions, and attempts to define a new form of political thinking that may not be easily recognisable in a culture fixated on the transformative power of wresting pride out of the grasp of shame.

The strategy of reading against the grain of a linear narrative of progression is continued in chapters on friendship and loss in Willa Cather's work, on Sylvia Townsend Warner's failed revolutions and failed relationships in *Summer Will Show*, and in Love's excellent reading of 'spoiled identity' in *The Well of Loneliness*. If critics and readers have felt uncomfortable with these works, it is because the feelings they inspire have no place in contemporary political activity. Feelings of shame, regret and failure are, in fact, often seen as inimical to political action. Love points out that in a climate of increasing visibility and acceptability of queer existence, feelings of shame become themselves shameful. Post-Stonewall queers have no right to feel ashamed. Optimism and affirmation in the present—directed towards the ever-progressive future—have the capacity not only to 'diminish the suffering of queer historical subjects' but also to 'blin[d] us to the continuities between past and present': to the continuing presence of shame, negativity and backwardness in contemporary queer life. (29) In the face of affirmation and inclusion, it becomes trickier to remember and identify the affective force that a history of damage has on the present and to recognise the ways in which

queer life is still structured around homophobia and exclusion.

Criticism, even queer criticism, can have a problematic role in negating historical suffering:

Criticism ... lays bare the conditions of exclusion and inequality and it gestures toward alternative trajectories for the future. Both aspects are important; however, to the extent that the imaginative function of criticism is severed from its critical function—to the extent that it becomes mere optimism—it loses its purchase on the past. (29)

This rejection of the past, according to Love, is part and parcel of the contemporary forces of gay normalisation: 'The invitation to join the mainstream is an invitation to jettison gay identity and its accreted historical meanings ... Resisting the call of gay normalization means refusing to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead.' (30) This book is not just an exploration of negativity and negative affect in and out of the queer literary canon. It is also an attempt to attend to queer history—with all its absences, embarrassments, and sorrows—and to recognise that shame, the flipside of pride, did not disappear in 1969. Love's theoretically sophisticated and original book comes as a relief to someone who was born a long time after Stonewall but still feels the need to embrace the anachronistic, the retrograde, and the depressing sides of contemporary queer existence. And, in fact,

occasionally *feels* anachronistic, retrograde, and depressing.

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1. Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2001.
 2. Nealon, p. 9.
 3. Nealon, p. 23.
 4. Nealon, p. 8.