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Sadness: Seriously

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SADNESS:
SERIOUSLY
Fiona Brideoake

Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History by Heather Love. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. Pp. 206. \$42.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love offers a nuanced, reflective, and beautifully written exploration of an abjected body of texts attesting to a queer past characterized by sadness, loss, and suffering. Exploring the work of Walter Pater, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Willa Cather, and Radclyffe Hall, Love identifies such disparate figures as sharing an oblique and problematic relationship to the homosexual identity they variously preceded, evaded, rejected, or embraced only in terms of a now-dated discourse of inversion. Through her investigation of such seemingly superseded texts and their historical moments, Love offers an acutely perceptive account of the contemporary status and stakes of queer history and criticism, exploring why such texts pose particular problems for contemporary analysis while also evoking uncomfortable investments and ongoing identifications.

Love observes that a “central paradox of any transformative criticism is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence” (1), posing the question of how to acknowledge this troubled past without remaining bound to it. Love’s study speaks to a political moment characterized by a striking tension between an American public sphere characterized by rights-based political advances and

panoply of Human Rights Campaign–endorsed images of beaming, buff, and professionally legitimized lesbians and gay men, their children hunting for Easter eggs on the White House lawn, and the bleaker realities of those queer people, disproportionately people of color, for whom physical safety, quality health care, housing, education, and full citizenship remain the aspirational hallmarks of a hazy political horizon. Engaging the problem of articulating a queer past commensurate to such an ambivalent present, Love identifies *backwardness* as an archetypal figure of queer historical experience. As she asserts,

Backwardness means many things here: shyness, ambivalence, failure, melancholia, loneliness, regression, victimhood, heartbreak, antimodernism, immaturity, self-hatred, despair, shame. I describe backwardness as both a queer historical structure and as a model for queer historiography. (146)

Taking up a range of late nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century texts and figures whose texts explore and evince social negativity, Love articulates a backward canon of antimodern modernists whose representations of queer melancholia can neither be incorporated easily into Whiggish models of the queer past nor

expunged from the queer present. Love acknowledges the potential ambivalence of reifying phobic associations between queerness and backwardness, exemplified by the figuration of same-sex desire as a form of arrested or damaged psychosexual development (6). She nonetheless underscores the structuring significance of retrospective orientation within queer culture of the last one hundred years, variously manifest in the aesthetic nostalgia of camp, kitsch, and fandom; explorations of memory, spectrality, and spiritualism (7); attention to “childish” pleasures and traumas; and the “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” that Judith Halberstam describes elsewhere as constituting “queer time.”¹

Feeling Backward works most powerfully as historiographic polemic, with the main force of its argument deriving from its extended and nuanced introductory chapters. One of the text’s strengths lies in Love’s assured exploration of generational trends in gay and lesbian historiography and their relationship to the political present. As she describes, the emergence of gay and lesbian history in the 1970s and early 1980s was marked by a turn away from a representational history “littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants” (1). Such scholarship expunged the more difficult aspects of the gay and lesbian past in order

to instantiate a more just present, or alternately responded to histories of exclusion and suffering by articulating teleological narratives of ever increasing enfranchisement (1–3). Affectively intense romantic friendships were reified in this period as the paradigmatic form of historical relationship between women, affirming a genealogical link between latter-day lesbian feminists and figures such as the Ladies of Llangollen, whose eighteenth-century Welsh ménage was figured as blissfully free of hostile or prurient attention. Reappropriating its central terms from histories of stigma and abuse, Love notes that queer theory has proven more able to explore more problematic aspects of queer experience and representation, its attention to the psychic contours of shame, abjection, and exile complicating identitarian claims governed by the Foucauldian logic of reverse discourse. She nonetheless insists that analyses of same-sex desire are compromised by their failure to attend to the structuring effects of both social opprobrium and its resistance: “Queerness is structured by this central turn; it is both abject and exalted, a ‘mixture of delicious and freak.’ This contradiction is lived out on the level of individual subjectivity; homosexuality is experienced as a stigmatizing mark as well as a form of romantic exceptionalism” (3).

As her title suggests, Love joins with critics, including Carolyn

Dinshaw, L. O. A. Fradenburg, Carla Freccero, and Christopher Nealon, in exploring the identifications that bring historians and their objects of inquiry into metaphorical contiguity. As she avers, “[W]e cannot help searching the past for images of ourselves” (45), these viscerally experienced investments constituting a range of “unexpected continuities” between the queer present and a seemingly superseded past (17). The historiographic turn to affect pushed back against the chastening impulses of New Historicism by emphasizing the pleasures of such transtemporal identifications between historians and their subjects of study. Love nonetheless locates her project in relation to this affective turn by characterizing such recognitions “not as consoling but as shattering.” As she states, “What has been most problematic about gay and lesbian historiography to date is not, I want to argue, its attachment to identity, but rather its consistently affirmative bias” (45), leading her to attend to texts and figures embodying melancholia, suffering, and loss, rather than the prescient instantiation of contemporary political and aesthetic ideals. While acknowledging the desires for community manifest in the assertions of historical kinship that Nealon terms “affect-genealogies,” Love therefore suggests that such affective bonds be recognized as ghostly and impossible, their constitutive failure disclosing the

ambivalence characteristic of all forms of community (98).

In five chapters, Love considers figures including the historically marginalized Walter Pater, stranded between the shores of late-Victorian aestheticism and early modernism, linking his nostalgic evocation of Renaissance culture to the tension between his privileged position as an Oxford don and his “internal exile,” immediately prior to Oscar Wilde’s debut of the modern homosexual role, at the “freakish circumference” of gender and sexual norms (57). Love further explores Cather and Townsend Warner, who distanced their respective ethics of friendship and socialist revolution from public avowals of same-sex identification or desire, describing the way in which these politically diverse texts and authors are resistant both to conventional forms of political optimism and the recuperative work of contemporary critics seeking to usher them into the queer canonical fold (8).

Love’s most compelling chapter focuses on Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), in which Stephen Gordon’s melodramatic martyrdom exemplifies the sapphic dénouement that Catharine Stimpson describes as “the dying fall”—“a narrative of damnation, of the lesbian’s suffering as a lonely outcast” (quoted on 101). Observing the animus that surrounds this most famous and ostensibly toxic of lesbian texts, Love suggests that

contemporary readers are discomfited, not only by the novel’s tragic teleology and discourse of congenital inversion, but the “extreme sadness . . . [that] has allowed it to function as a synecdoche for the worst of life before Stonewall” (101). Just as Stephen shrinks from her own image in the novel’s infamous “mirror scene,” queer readers have shrunk from Hall’s mawkish, yet undeniably affecting, melodrama. And just as Stephen is denounced as a traitor by a ghostly cavalcade of inverts in the novel’s hallucinatory final scene, so too, Love suggests, does the novel haunt the critics who have disavowed “the difficult feelings that have been so central to queer existence in the last century” (127).

Love’s attentiveness to such “improper” affective modes differs in tone and focus from the avowal of the historical linkage between queerness and antisociality articulated most notably in Lee Edelman’s 2004 *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.² Rather than refusing the redemptive horizon held out by reproductive futurism, she affirms a critical and political method at once attentive to the losses of both past and present and engaged in the project of alchemizing past suffering into “an alternate form of politics that would make space for various forms of ruined subjectivity” (162). *Feeling Backward* thus advocates an historiographic ethic in which the instantiation of a progressive

queer present is founded on neither the erasure of past suffering nor the reification of queer negativity. Rather, it constitutes a fittingly affecting call for an expanded understanding of political subjectivity, in which “feeling backward” at once acknowledges the uncanny persistence of a painful queer past and the necessary labor of feeling our way toward a transformative queer future.

Fiona Brideoake is an assistant professor of literature at American University. She has published on queer historiography, Bluestocking feminism, and Jane Austen, and completed a book-length study, “The Ladies of Llangollen: A Queer Romantic History.” Her current project focuses on Harriet Bowdler’s 1807 The Family Shakespeare.

NOTES

1. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 1.
2. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).