Feeling Backward
Loss and the Politics of Queer History

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Introduction

Who will write the history of tears?

—Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*

A central paradox of any transformative criticism is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence. Oppositional criticism opposes not only existing structures of power but also the very history that gives it meaning. Insofar as the losses of the past motivate us and give meaning to our current experience, we are bound to memorialize them (“We will never forget”). But we are equally bound to overcome the past, to escape its legacy (“We will never go back”). For groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it. Sometimes it seems it would be better to move on—to let, as Marx wrote, the dead bury the dead. But it is the damaging aspects of the past that tend to stay with us, and the desire to forget may itself be a symptom of haunting. The dead can bury the dead all day long and still not be done.

The history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants. Those who are directly identified with same-sex desire most often end up dead; if they manage to survive, it is on such compromised terms that it makes death seem attractive. Looking back at these texts and images can be painful. Many contemporary critics dismiss negative or dark representations entirely, arguing that the depiction of same-sex love as impossible, tragic, and doomed to failure is purely ideological. Recent cultural histories attest to a far wider range of experience across the century. Despite such evidence, however, it has been difficult to dispel the affective power of these representations.

Early work in gay and lesbian studies tended to deny the significance of these depressing accounts. These critics responded to the history of
violence and stigmatization by affirming the legitimacy of gay and les-
bian existence. More recently, scholars working in the field of queer
studies have taken a different approach, attempting to counter stigma
by incorporating it. The word “queer,” like “fag” or “dyke” but unlike
the more positive “gay” or “lesbian,” is a slur. When queer was adopted
in the late 1980s it was chosen because it evoked a long history of insult
and abuse—you could hear the hurt in it. Queer theorists drew on the
energies of confrontational, stigma-inflected activism of groups like
ACT UP and Queer Nation who had first taken up this “forcibly bitter-
sweet” term.\textsuperscript{1} The emphasis on injury in queer studies has made critics
in this field more willing to investigate the darker aspects of queer rep-
resentation and experience and to attend to the social, psychic, and cor-
poreal effects of homophobia.

The turn to the negative in queer studies was also the result of a deep
intellectual engagement during this period with the historiography,
politics, and philosophy of Michel Foucault. In his account of “reverse
discourse” in \textit{The History of Sexuality}, Foucault describes the ways
that dominated groups may take advantage of the reversibility of power.
He writes that discourse produces power “but also undermines and exposes
it”\textsuperscript{2}; for those alive to the fragility of power, there are many opportunities
to turn situations of domination to advantage. Foucault’s paradigmatic
example of such a turn is the invention of homosexuality in its modern
form out of the sexological, medical, and criminal discourses of the late
nineteenth century. Describing the transition from the legal and reli-

gious discourses that defined sodomy as a sin to the human sciences
that classified homosexuality (or, more properly, inversion) as an illness,
Foucault argues that the creation of this new social category enabled the
emergence of the first homosexual movements: “homosexuality began to
speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be
acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories
by which it was medically disqualified.”\textsuperscript{1}

Homosexual identity is indelibly marked by the effects of reverse dis-

course: on the one hand, it continues to be understood as a form of
damaged or compromised subjectivity; on the other hand, the character-
istic forms of gay freedom are produced in response to this history. Pride
and visibility offer antidotes to shame and the legacy of the closet; they
are made in the image of specific forms of denigration. Queerness is

structured by this central turn; it is both abject and exalted, a “mixture
of delicious and freak.”\textsuperscript{3} 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. It also appears at the
structural level in the gap between mass-mediated images of attractive,
well-to-do gays and lesbians and the reality of ongoing violence and
inequality.

The emphasis on damage in queer studies exists in a state of tension
with a related and contrary tendency—the need to resist damage and to
affirm queer existence. This tension is evident in discussions of the
“progress” of gays and lesbians across the twentieth century. Although
many queer critics take exception to the idea of a linear, triumphalist
view of history, we are in practice deeply committed to the notion of
progress; despite our reservations, we just cannot stop dreaming of a
better life for queer people.\textsuperscript{4} Such utopian desires are at the heart of
the collective project of queer studies and integral to the history of gay
and lesbian identity. Still, the critical compulsion to fix—at least
imaginatively—the problems of queer life has made it difficult to fully
generate with such difficulties. Critics find themselves in an odd position:
we are not sure if we should explore the link between homosexuality and
loss, or set about proving that it does not exist.\textsuperscript{5}

This ambivalence is legible in responses to the saddest texts from the
queer canon. Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel \textit{The Well of Loneliness} is a case
in point. This melodramatic account of the ill-treatment and suffering of
a female invert in the early twentieth century has been the object of re-
petition attacks by readers who have found it outdated, homophobic, de-
pressing, and manipulative. At the same time, it is one of the most read
and discussed of all queer novels. Despite complaints about their tox-
icity, such tragic, tear-soaked accounts of same-sex desire compel readers
in a way that brighter stories of liberation do not. Although it may be
difficult to account for the continuing hold of these texts on us in the
present, we have evidence of it in the powerful feelings—both positive
and negative—that they inspire.

It is difficult to talk about such effects in critical contexts, where am-

bivalence tends to resolve itself into critique and gestures toward politi-
cal utility. The premium on strategic response in queer studies has
meant that the painful and traumatic dimensions of these texts (and of
the experience of reading them) have been minimized or disavowed. In this book I have tried to resist the affirmative turn in queer studies in order to dwell at length on the “dark side” of modern queer representation. It is not clear how such dark representations from the past will lead toward a brighter future for queers. Still, it may be necessary to check the impulse to turn these representations to good use in order to see them at all.

_Feeling Backward_ turns its attention to several late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary texts visibly marked by queer suffering. The specific texts I read by Walter Pater, Willa Cather, Radclyffe Hall, and Sylvia Townsend Warner are quite different from each other in terms of political and aesthetic sensibilities; they also offer radically different treatments of the theme of same-sex desire, from the achingly unspecific to the thunderously explicit. These texts form, however, significant points in a tradition of queer experience and representation that I call “feeling backward.” These dark, ambivalent texts register these authors’ painful negotiation of the coming of modern homosexuality. Such representations constitute a crucial “archive of feeling,” an account of the corporeal and psychic costs of homophobia. In their work, I pay particular attention to feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, resentment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness. These feelings are tied to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical “impossibility” of same-sex desire.

Of course, same-sex desire is not as impossible as it used to be; as a result, the survival of feelings such as shame, isolation, and self-hatred into the post-Stonewall era is often the occasion for further feelings of shame. The embarrassment of owning such feelings, out of place as they are in a movement that takes pride as its watchword, is acute. It is also hard to see how feelings like bitterness or self-hatred might contribute to any recognizable political praxis. Texts that insist on social negativity underline the gap between aspiration and the actual. At odds with the wishful thinking that characterizes political criticism, they are held accountable for the realities that they represent and often end up being branded as internally homophobic, retrograde, or too depressing to be of use. These texts do have a lot to tell us, though: they describe what it is like to bear a “disqualified” identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury—not fixing it.

The Backward Turn

A central myth of queer existence describes the paralyzing effects of loss. The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is significant not only as an account of the violence perpetrated against those accused of the grave sin of homosexuality; it also describes the consequences of the refusal to forget such losses. Alerted by the visiting angels, Lot and his family are allowed to escape on the condition that they do not look behind them. Although Lot and his daughters obey God’s order and go on to produce a new lineage, his wife looks back and thus becomes a pillar of salt. By refusing the destiny that God offers her, Lot’s wife is cut off from her family and from the future. In turning back toward this lost world she herself is lost: she becomes a monument to destruction, an emblem of eternal regret.

_Feeling Backward_ is populated by iconic figures that turn backward: Lot’s wife turning to look at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; Orpheus turning back toward Eurydice at the gates of the underworld; Odysseus looking back at the Sirens as his boat pulls away; Walter Benjamin’s angel of history turning away from the future to face the ruined landscape of the past. My book’s central trope of the turn backward might be understood as a figure of figuration itself. The word “trope” derives from “turn”; it indicates a turning of a word away from its literal meaning. In reading figures of backwardness as allegories of queer historical experience, I bring together a range of disparate figures, often pulling them out of their original contexts. My aim is to create an image repertoire of queer modernist melancholia in order to underline both the losses of queer modernity and the deeply ambivalent negotiation of these losses within the literature of the period.

The idea of modernity—with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance—is intimately bound up with backwardness. The association of progress and regress is a function not only of the failure of so many of modernity’s key projects but also of the reliance of the concept of modernity on excluded, denigrated, or superseded others. Dipesh Chakrabarty writes that “if modernity is to be a definable, delimited concept, we must identify some people or practices as non-modern.” If modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century aimed to move humanity forward, it did so in part by perfecting techniques for mapping and disciplining subjects considered to be lagging
that such links are deployed against gays and lesbians so regularly, we have an obligation to counter them, which is not altogether easy. One must insist on the modernity of the queer; like any claim about modernity, though, the argument actually turns on backwardness—a backwardness disavowed or overcome. For queers, having been branded as nonmodern or as a drag on the progress of civilization, the desire to be recognized as part of the modern social order is strong. Narratives of gay and lesbian progress inevitably recall the painful history of the homosexual’s birth as one of modernity’s backward children.

Arguing against backwardness is further complicated by the often overlooked or unstated difficulty of distinguishing between homophobic discourse and homosexual existence. Accounts of queer life as backward are ideological, however backwardness has the status of a lived reality in gay and lesbian life. Not only do many queers, as I suggest, feel backward, but backwardness has been taken up as a key feature of queer culture. Camp, for instance, with its tender concern for outmoded elements of popular culture and its refusal to get over childhood pleasures and traumas, is a backward art.13 Over the last century, queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects.14

Feeling Backward groups together a handful of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors under the rubric of backward modernism. Each author’s work departs in various ways from classic definitions of modernist literary practice: Walter Pater is generally understood as a late Victorian or aestheticist writer, Willa Cather as an antimodernist, Radclyffe Hall as a popular sentimental novelist, and Sylvia Townsend Warner as a late modernist. These authors are also arrayed across quite a wide political spectrum. While Radclyffe Hall clung to the nationalist agrarian values of her upper-class English background (eventually embracing some forms of fascism), Sylvia Townsend Warner was a committed socialist and anti-imperialist who traveled to Spain during the civil war. These authors also wear their queerness very differently. Walter Pater might be understood as living and writing before the birth of public modern homosexual identity (he died in 1894, one year before Oscar Wilde’s obscenity trial). Of the authors I consider, Radclyffe Hall is certainly the figure most readily identified with modern homosexual identity (in the years following the 1928 obscenity trial of The Well of
Loneliness, she identified publicly and privately as an invert). Willa Cather, on the other hand, despite some early brushes with a queer identification and her forty-year relationship with Edith Lewis, did not see herself as queer. Although Sylvia Townsend Warner did not resist a queer identification as adamantly as Cather did, she seems to have understood her lesbian relationship with Valentine Ackland as part of a more general identification with social outsiders.

A shared feeling of backwardness in relation to the coming of modern homosexual identity is what draws me to these authors. While contemporary gay, lesbian, and queer critics tend to see queer subjects during this period as isolated and longing for a future community, the texts I consider turn their backs on the future: they choose isolation, turn toward the past, or choose to live in a present disconnected from any larger historical continuum. Some of the texts that I consider do gesture toward a brighter future; at the same time, they often withdraw or cancel this image. In his book The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry, for instance, Walter Pater looks breathlessly forward to a reigniting of the buried humanistic warmth of the original Renaissance. At the same time, however, it is understood that the future he desires will be the result of reanimating the dead. To the extent that the future might represent the eruption of the wholly new, it is not something that Pater desires. Such temporal ambivalence is echoed across the texts that I consider. Even in the most patently forward moments—in the longing for a worker’s revolution in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s Summer Will Show, or the call for homosexual acceptance at the end of Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness—these texts engage as deeply with the past as they do with the present.

As I trace a tradition of queer backwardness in this book’s central literary texts, I also consider the backward feelings—shame, depression, and regret—that they inspire in contemporary critics. In that these texts do not welcome contemporary critics—instead they turn away from us—they often have proved difficult to integrate into a queer literary genealogy. As queer readers we tend to see ourselves as reaching back toward isolated figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them. It is hard to know what to do with texts that resist our advances. Texts or figures that refuse to be redeemed disrupt not only the progress narrative of queer history but also our sense of queer identity in the present. We find ourselves deeply unsettled by our identifications with these figures: the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm in the present.

Lot’s wife clings to the past and is ruined by it. This figure has taken on a new resonance for queers in the decades since Stonewall. While it was once the case that admitting homosexual feelings meant acknowledging one’s status as a tragic figure, gay liberation has opened multiple escape routes from those doomed cities of the plain. With increasing legal protection and provisional inclusion in several arenas of civic life, gays and lesbians no longer see themselves as necessarily damned. Although a brighter future for queers is not assured, it is conceivable. However, as in the story of Lot’s escape from Sodom, moving into that future is conditional: one must leave the past behind.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno discuss the danger of looking backward in Dialectic of Enlightenment. In their retelling of the story of Odysseus and the Sirens, they understand the allure of the Sirens as “that of losing oneself in the past.” The Sirens are the repository of historical memory, but to answer their call is to be destroyed: “if the Sirens know everything that has happened, they demand the future as its price.” This story, for Horkheimer and Adorno, offers an allegory of the modern relationship to history: in a society that is based on use and appropriation, the relation to the past can only be instrumental. The creation of a “fixed order of time” serves to “liberate the present moment from the power of the past by banishing the latter beyond the absolute boundary of the irrecoverable and placing it, as usable knowledge, in the service of the present.” Such a relation to the past does not seek to rescue it as “something living” but rather to transform it into “the material of progress.”

By being bound to the mast, Odysseus survives his encounter with the Sirens: though he can hear them singing, he cannot do anything about it. What saves him is that even as he looks backward he keeps moving forward. One might argue that Odysseus offers an ideal model of the relation to the historical past: listen to it, but do not allow yourself to be destroyed by it. Certainly for queer subjects “on the move,” the notion of losing oneself in the past is not appealing. Yet the emphasis on progress in contemporary gay and lesbian politics has meant that today we must, like Odysseus, steel ourselves against close encounters with the queer past. This refusal to be held back or turned around has made it difficult to approach the past as something living—as something dissonant,
beyond our control, and capable of touching us in the present. Clearly
annihilation is not a goal for the movement, but an absolute refusal to
linger in the past may entail other kinds of losses. Are we sure we are
right to resist the siren song of the past?

"Advances" such as gay marriage and the increasing media visibility
of well-heeled gays and lesbians threaten to obscure the continuing den-
igration and dismissal of queer existence. One may enter the main-
stream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot
make it—the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the gen-
derdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a
host of unmentionable others. Social negativity clings not only to these
figures but also to those who lived before the common era of gay
liberation—the abject multitude against whose experience we define our
own liberation. Given the new opportunities available to some gays and
lesbians, the temptation to forget—to forget the outrages and humilia-
tions of gay and lesbian history and to ignore the ongoing suffering
of those not borne up by the rising tide of gay normalization—is stronger
than ever.

The Politics of Affect

My attention to feeling in *Feeling Backward* has been influenced by the
work of many critics who have sought to think systematically about the
relation between emotion and politics. In works on racial melancholy,
gay shame, and historical trauma, critics have struggled to bring to-
gether traditionally polarized terms such as the psychic and the social,
subject and structure, politics and loss, affect and law, and love and his-
tory. You can see this yoking together of heterogeneous things in several
recent titles: *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*; "Feeling Brown"; *The Melan-
choly of Race; Racial Castration; Melancholia and Morality; The Psychic
Life of Power*. A question hangs over this new body of work: what if psy-
ic life and social life were simply too different to be usefully articulated
together?

Several critics interested in or even invested in the conjunction of the
psychic and the social have expressed concern about the dangers of for-
getting the differences between them. Lauren Berlant in "The Subject
of True Feeling" considers the conflicts in scale and political goals between
psychic life (and particularly the putative authenticity of pain and

trauma) and structural social transformation. Specifically, she questions
the aptness of feeling as a ground for thinking the social, both because
of feeling's weird phenomenology and because of chronic twentieth-
century overinvestment in the authenticity of its being:

What does it mean for the struggle to shape collective life when a polit-
ics of true feeling organizes analysis, discussion, fantasy, and policy?
When feeling, the most subjective thing, the thing that makes persons
publish and marks their location, takes the temperature of power; medi-
ates personhood, experience, and history; takes over the space of ethics
and truth? When the shock of pain is said only to produce clarity when
shock can as powerfully be said to produce panic, misrecognition, the
shakiness of perception's ground?17

Politics and feelings are very different kinds of things: the public sphere
is big, feelings are small; social life happens out there, psychic life,
 somewhere inside; public time is collective time, measured by the clock,
whereas in psychic life the trains hardly ever run on time. Such prob-
lems of scale, location, and temporality simply serve to remind us that
the public sphere and affect are different kinds of objects; as such, they
have different histories and critical frameworks, and they call for different
kinds of responses.

Like many other recent critics, I have been deeply influenced by Ray-
mond Williams's concept of "structures of feeling" in *Marxism and Lit-
erature*. Williams offers a crucial link between cognition and affect and, in
doing so, advances an argument against what Rei Terada has called the
"expressive hypothesis"—the idea that feeling flows naturally from the
subject and expresses the truth of that subject.18 Williams defines a
structure of feeling as follows:

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and
tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships:
not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought;
practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating
continuity. We are then defining these elements as a "structure": as a
set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension.
Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process,
often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idio-
syncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely oth-
erwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, in-
deed its specific hierarchies.19
Williams proposes that the term “structure of feeling” might have special relevance to literature in that literature accounts for experience at the juncture of the psychic and the social. The term has also been crucial to queer studies, where the analysis of uncodified subjective experiences is an important supplement to the study of the history of formal laws, practices, and ideologies. The saturation of experience with ideology is particularly important to queer critics because homophobia and heterosexism inflect everyday life in ways that can be difficult to name.

For Williams, the primary value of feeling in this essay is diagnostic. In paying attention to things like tone, dress, and habit, one may discover “social experiences in solution.” It is possible to detect impulses that are not yet organized as movements; we can understand and respond to a historical moment that is not yet fully articulated in institutions as the dominant mode of existence. Williams considers the diagnostic usefulness of affect in relation to social groups (the generation is a significant grouping for him) and to aesthetic texts, but I think we might also consider the diagnostic usefulness of affect in relation to individual subjects. Particularly in thinking about the psychic damage of social exclusion, it seems useful to consider a range of negative affects as indexes of social trauma. Antihomophobic inquiry depends on sustained attention to the intimate effects of homophobia. In Feeling Backward, personal encounters and the feelings that they elicit stand in for theories of history and of the social.20

In addition to the diagnostic understanding of affect’s usefulness, critics have also recently explored affect as a motivational system and as the grounds for forging new collectivities. This understanding of affect is important today because of a crisis of political motivation on the Left (what Wendy Brown, returning to an essay by Walter Benjamin, has identified as a condition of “Left Melancholy”). This crisis of motivation helps explain a certain paradox: critics who are interested in the politics of affect often tend to be interested in bad affects—and by that I do not mean simply ones that make you feel bad but also those that seem especially bad for politics. The most widely discussed bad feelings are shame and melancholia—feelings associated more closely with blushing and crying than with traditional political activities like grassroots organizing and demonstrating.

Sianne Ngai combines a diagnostic approach to affect with attention to the problem of action in Ugly Feelings. Ngai takes on affects that seem especially unsuited to politics (things like envy, irritation, paranoia, anxiety). These “minor and generally unprestigious feelings” are not even cathartic—they are sustained and distracting in a way that tends to block action. Ngai distinguishes these “intentionally weak and therefore often politically ambiguous” feelings both from “grander passions like anger and fear” (partly understood as grand because they can motivate people to do things, even grand things) and bad feelings like shame and melancholia and sympathy that are associated with (or can be linked to) notions of virtue.21

Ngai’s account of affect’s usefulness is primarily diagnostic. The ugly feelings she surveys are useful insofar as they help critics to understand the contours of the contemporary political situation, but they are not likely to ignite revolutionary action or even mass resistance. I do not think it would be right to read this interest in intentionally weak feelings or this refusal to directly link affect and action as a disinterest in action. Rather, I would venture that this persistent attention to “useless” feelings is all about action: about how and why it is blocked, and about how to locate motives for political action when none is visible. Ngai only indicates such a potential link between affect and action negatively, for instance when she suggests that the diagnostic power of particular affects is in inverse relation to their inability to make things happen: “the unsuitability of these weakly intentional feelings for forceful or unambiguous action is what amplifies their power to diagnose situations, and situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular” (27). The most significant of these “situations marked by blocked or thwarted action” will be for many of us, of course, simply our own historical situation. The utopian image of feelings actually making something happen is banned here, I would suggest, in the same way that the image of the future is banned in the messianic last moment of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”

Many queer critical and activist projects are more sanguine about the possibilities of feeling as a basis for political action. The feeling of shame—once understood as a poison that must be purged from the queer community—has proven to be particularly attractive as a basis for alternative models of politics. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has written at length on the contagiousness and volatility of shame and has made the concept central to her understanding of performativity.22 In The Trouble
with Normal, Michael Warner considers shame as the basis for a "special kind of sociability" in queer culture: "a relation to others" in queer circles "begins in an acknowledgement of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself." This understanding of a shared abjection cuts through hierarchies. "Queer scenes," Warner writes, "are the true salons des refusés, where the most heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy by their common experience of being despised and rejected in a world of norms that they now recognize as false morality."23 Drawing on work by Sedgwick and Warner, Douglas Crimp considers the potential of shame to articulate "collectivities of the shamed."24

If shame will bring us together, it is also the case that it can, will, and does tear us apart. Although producing positive affects and identifications as a basis for collective action is certainly a significant part of the politics of feeling, I argue that we need to pursue a fuller engagement with negative affects and with the intransigent difficulties of making feeling the basis for politics. Such an approach means engaging with affects that have not traditionally been thought of as political and also dealing with the disjunction between affective and the social. Anne Anlin Cheng addresses these difficulties in The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief. In considering the gap between social grief and social grievance, she asks whether grievance would ever be capable of responding to the psychic wounds of social inequality. For Cheng, a central problem is that the effects of grief might unfit us for the redress of grievance: there are ways of feeling bad that do not make us feel like fighting back. That does not mean we should not fight back; it only means that we need to think harder about how to bring that aspiration in line with the actual experience of being under attack.

Feeling Better?
The 1995 documentary film The Celluloid Closet, directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, offers an interesting site for thinking about the importance of damage in the history of queer representation. Like the Vito Russo book on which it is based, the film provides a history of images of gays and lesbians in Hollywood over the course of the twentieth century. The directors intersperse film clips with interviews with actors, directors, and critics, many of whom not only comment on the films themselves but also recount their own experiences of seeing them. By using multiple voices, the film offers a history of gay and lesbian reception over the last several decades. At the same time, The Celluloid Closet creates a new context for the reception of these clips using voice-over and montage. While many of the people interviewed in the film attest to what we might call a trauma of queer spectatorship—most often articulated as an isolated and uninformed viewing of negative images of homosexuality—the film counters this experience by placing these images in layered historical and personal contexts. The use of interviews creates the atmosphere of a group screening, in which knowing subjects speak over and against the images we see on the screen and so drain them of their pathologizing force. Through these techniques and through the construction of a narrative of progress across the century, The Celluloid Closet seeks to contain many of the negative images it includes.

An interesting moment of reception is staged in response to a clip from William Wyler’s 1961 film The Children’s Hour. In this scene, Martha Dobie (Shirley MacLaine) declares her love to Karen Wright (Audrey Hepburn) by telling her, “I feel so damned sick and dirty, I can’t stand it.”25 When Karen attempts to comfort her, Martha cries, “Don’t touch me,” and buries her face in the sofa. A signal moment in the history of American cinema and in the history of lesbian representation, this scene between Martha and Karen was produced at the end of a thirty-year prohibition against depictions of “perverse sexuality” in Hollywood films. The film itself was instrumental in allowing the introduction of “tasteful” representations of same-sex relations in mainstream cinema. As Patricia White argues in her 1999 book Uninvited, however, the introduction of more explicit representations of lesbianism was hardly an unambiguous victory. If female same-sex desire becomes more visible in the 1960s, it is only as a lamentable perversion, inextricably linked with images of loneliness, shame, and failure. Even in a “sympathetic” production like The Children’s Hour, visible lesbians do not fare well. White remarks that Martha’s “coming-out” scene in this film is immediately followed by her “tasteful" suicide by hanging.”26

The scene of Martha’s confession is literally “contained” within a section of The Celluloid Closet entitled “Shame” that features several disturbing
images of homosexual abjection. This section is introduced by an intertitle that features the word “Shame” in bold black type as well as a graphic representation of prison bars closing over a white background. At the same time that this graphic serves to represent the repression suffered by gays and lesbians, it also effectively locks away these images, as if to prevent them from contaminating the rest of the film. But if the film seeks to neutralize these representations, the individual voices it includes often work against the general ethos of containment. The filmmakers include two very different responses to the scene of Martha’s confession. The first of these is by Shirley MacLaine, who discusses her participation in the making of the film. In her commentary, MacLaine reflects on the strangeness of making the film in the 1960s, when there was so little public discourse about homosexuality. She mentions how odd it was that no one on the set ever talked about the issues of homosexual representation raised insistently by the screenplay. While MacLaine appears mildly amused by their “innocence,” her tone darkens as she considers the results of their efforts. She bemoans the film’s representation of Martha’s tragic fate, and expresses her regret that they did not “do the movie right.” These comments accord with the progressivist ethos of The Celluloid Closet, which presents stereotypical images as errors on the way to a more accurate and positive reflection of gay and lesbian existence. In this scene, the directors replace the abject image of Martha writhing on the sofa with an older MacLaine who, miked and smiling, assures the viewer that the earlier representation was a mistake.

MacLaine’s appearance is followed by a brief commentary from the writer and sex-activist Susie Bright, who discusses the film in terms of her own queer identification. Like MacLaine, Bright expresses sadness over this image, but she refuses to situate this representation in the past. Describing the scene and her response to it, she says:

The loathing she feels, how sick she is with herself … it still makes me cry when I see that. And I think, you know, “Why am I crying? Why does this still get to me? This is just an old, silly movie, you know, and people don’t feel this way anymore.” But I don’t think that’s true. I think people do feel that way today still. And there’s part of me despite all of my little signs, you know, like, “Happy!” “Proud!” “Well-adjusted!” “ Bisexual!” “Queer!” “Kinky!”—you know, no matter how many posters I hold up saying, “I’m a big pervert and I’m so happy about it”—there’s this part of me that’s like, “How could I be this way?”

Bright discusses her familiarity with the shame and self-loathing depicted in the movie; she contrasts her reaction to the film with the discourse of gay liberation that she knows to be the antidote to such feelings. She describes her own efforts to believe the narrative of progress that for MacLaine is simply the truth of gay history (“That wouldn’t happen anymore”). But in discussing her powerful identification with the film, Bright reflects on the unexpected continuities between the queer past and the queer present. Although Bright embraces the contemporary culture of pride marches, sex radicalism, and queer activism, she recognizes its inadequacy in countering a long history of shame and social exclusion.28 In giving voice to the question, “How could I be this way?” Bright avows her susceptibility or openness to two stigmatizing frameworks: on the one hand, the moral framework that brands her as “dirty” and demands, “How could you?”; on the other hand, the medical framework that brands her as “sick,” and raises, more dispassionately, the question of etiology: “How did you get to be this way?”

MacLaine’s comments about The Children’s Hour help us understand the conditions of production for the film, and in particular the culture of homophobia in the United States in the 1960s. They help us understand it—but they do not help us feel it. By historicizing the film, MacLaine seals it off from the present, burying it in a superseded realm of ignorance, shame, and suffering. Not only does she assure us that the cast and crew did the film wrong, she also tells us that the conditions of queer representation and queer existence have since been utterly transformed. Describing Martha’s renunciation and suicide, MacLaine asserts, “That’s not what she would do today. She would fight for her budding preference.”29 In her response to the film, Bright collapses past and present, partly effacing the specificity of that earlier moment and opening up the film as a resource for contemporary queer viewers who may have unexplained or excessive identifications with such texts.

Although critics have been attentive, especially in the last couple of decades, to the importance of shame, violence, and stigma in the historical record, certain forms of experience still remain off limits for most. These are representations that offer too stark an image of the losses of queer history. What has resulted is a disavowal of crucial aspects of this history and of the conditions of queer existence in the present.
Still Hurting

The classic statement on the importance of stigma in queer studies appears in Judith Butler’s article “Critically Queer.” Butler lauds “queer’s” ability to recall the long history of homophobic violence, but wonders whether the term can “overcome its constitutive history of injury.” 30 She argues that in order to use the word productively, we need to recognize its difficult history and at the same time rework it for current political uses: “if the term queer is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (228).

Butler’s attention to the implication of “queer” in personal and collective injury is crucial in recalling the “mixed history” of queer subjectivity, and this essay has largely set the terms for the “turn to stigma” in queer studies. Those terms are laid out clearly here: stigma is crucial, but its acceptance is conditional on its ability to be “turned” to good use in an antihomophobic political project. As in Foucault’s discussion of the “invention of homosexuality,” the invention of queer studies depends on the strategy of reverse discourse. Butler’s emphasis on the need for constant turning and constant reclamation is striking. Those who would risk taking on the name queer are subject to a double imperative: they must face backward toward a difficult past, and simultaneously forward, toward “urgent and expanding political purposes.” According to this vision, the work of “queering” is never done. If, in embracing “queer,” we have shown our willingness to engage with a “history of injury,” Butler makes it clear that we must not linger there but must constantly work to turn this term away from the past and toward the future.

While the field of queer studies has emphasized the limitations of reverse discourse, its methodology remains deeply bound to this strategy; it retains a faith in the possibility of transforming the base materials of social abjection into the gold of political agency. In this sense, the historical moment of the turn to “queer” is not very different from the moment of the invention of homosexuality or the moment of gay liberation. Early gay and lesbian criticism tended to ignore the difficulties of the past in order construct a positive history; queer criticism by contrast has focused on negative aspects of the past in order to use them for positive political purposes. Given that issues like gay shame and self-hatred are charged with the weight of difficult personal and collective histories, it is understandable that critics are eager to turn them to good use. But I am concerned that queer studies, in its haste to refashion such experiences, may not be adequately reckoning with their powerful legacies. Turning away from past degradation to a present or future affirmation means ignoring the past as past; it also makes it harder to see the persistence of the past in the present.

In his book on the Broadway musical Place for Us, D. A. Miller suggests a way to think about the relationship between the queer past and the queer present in terms of continuity rather than opposition or departure. Considering the ambivalent status of the musical in “the psyche of post-Stonewall man,” Miller suggests that the affective lives of queer subjects continue to be structured in much the same way they were before gay liberation:

“Broadway” denounces those early pre-sexual realities of gay experience to which, in numerous lives, it became forever bound: not just the solitude, shame, secretiveness by which the impossibility of social integration was first internalized; or the excessive sentimentality that was the necessary condition of sentiments allowed no real object; but also the intense, senseless joy that, while not identical to these destituions, is neither extricable from them. Precisely against such realities, however, is post-Stonewall gay identity defined: a declarable, dignified thing, rooted in a community, and taking manifestly sexual pleasures on this affirmative basis. No gay man could possibly regret the trade, could do anything but be grateful for it—if, that is, it were actually a trade, and his old embarrassments (including that of whatever gratification he was able to find through them) had not been retained, well after the moment of coming out, in the complex, incorrigible, rightly called fatal form of character. 31

Reflecting on his resistance to the call of gay pride, Miller tracks the surprising persistence of pre-Stonewall feelings in the wake of liberation. Although he acknowledges the important social and cognitive changes that have occurred in the wake of gay liberation, Miller points to the continuity between individual experience “before” and “after” such transformations. This image of character as stamped or branded by its early experience of shame captures a sense of the indelible nature of ideology’s effects. Contemporary gay identity is produced out of the
The Art of Losing

The effort to recapture the past is doomed from the start. To reconstruct the past, we build on ruins; to bring it to life, we chase after the fugitive dead. Bad enough if you want to tell the story of a conquering race, but to remember history’s losers is worse, for the loss that swallows the dead absorbs these others into an even more profound obscurity. The difficulty of reaching the dead will not keep us from trying. Virginia Woolf invokes the pathos of this failure in Lily Briscoe’s address to the dead Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse: “Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!” she cried, feeling the old horror come back—to want and want and not to have. Could she inflict that still? Mrs. Ramsay is inaccessible not only because she is dead but also because, it is implied, the desires of a “skimpy old maid” (269) like Lily are not the kind that can ever be satisfied. “Could she inflict that still?” While contact with the dead is impossible, queer history is marked by a double impossibility: we will never possess the dead; our longing for them is also marked by the historical impossibility of same-sex desire.

Jacques Lacan tells us—if anyone needs reminding—that love is an exercise in failure. His famous assertion that “there is no sexual relation” may stand in for the central psychoanalytic insight that sexuality is constituted by failure and impossibility rather than complementarity and fulfillment. Although such an assertion is true for everyone, some loves are more failed than others. Same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility, and loss. I do not mean by this that homosexual love is in its essence failed or impossible, any more than regular love is. The association between love’s failures and homosexuality is, however, a historical reality, one that has profound effects for contemporary queer subjects. In a Freudian psychoanalytic framework, homosexuality is often seen as a result of a failure of maturatio
or a failure to overcome primary cathexes, and it has been associated with narcissism and infantilism as well as with incomplete or failed gendering. At the same time, homosexual relations are often seen as marked by immaturity and selfishness, by the refusal to compromise (i.e., “settle” for marriage or monogamy) or to give back to society (i.e., raise children). For these reasons and many others, gay and lesbian relationships are seen as short-lived, fleeting, and doomed.

In such damning and dismissive accounts of homosexuality, one sees the way that homosexuality and homosexuals serve as scapegoats for the failures and impossibilities of desire itself. This insight is at the center of Lee Edelman’s 2004 book, No Future, the most important recent response to the affirmative turn in gay, lesbian, and queer criticism and to gay normalization as a social phenomenon. In a discussion of Hitchcock’s The Birds, Edelman discusses the “antisocial bent of sexuality”—its resistance to normative social forms—and points out that it is “acknowledged, and then only as pathology, only in those who are bent themselves.” Edelman argues that rather than trying to deny their associations with the antisocial (or the death drive), queers should take up “the figural burden of queerness” (27)—the burden of representing the dissolution of the social—rather than shuffling it off to someone else. Instead of insisting, in other words, that we are “good gays,” as capable of monogamy and childrearing as everyone else, Edelman recommends that queers embrace their association with the antisocial, while still pointing to the antisocial energies that run through all sexuality. He argues that “queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to [the place of the social order’s death drive], accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of that resistance from every social structure” (3).

Feeling Backward owes a debt to a long tradition of work on queer negativity—to Edelman’s No Future, and to the work of Leo Bersani, Tim Dean, and Christopher Lane. I am especially compelled by Edelman’s complete refusal of the affirmative turn in gay, lesbian, and queer contexts. My own emphasis in this book, however, is rather different. I am ultimately less interested in accounts of same-sex desire as antisocial or asocial than I am in instances of ruined or failed sociality. Although I share a deep skepticism with Edelman about political appeals to the future, I do not follow him in calling for the voiding of the future. Several of the texts that I consider evince ambivalence toward the future, but very few are marked by the blank refusals Edelman describes. I am more interested in the turn to the past than I am in the refusal of the future itself, and this concern puts me in a closer dialogue with critics working on shame, melancholia, depression, and pathos—the experience of failure rather than negativity itself.

Although this book is centrally concerned with psychic experience, I engage psychoanalysis only sporadically. My resistance is to psychoanalysis as a diagnostic reading practice—to reading through experience for structure. This resistance also informs a move away from the central methodology of cultural criticism: ideology critique, or lifting the veil of mystification to reveal the truth of social processes. Many critics in recent years have sought to articulate alternatives to this interpretive practice. Notable among these is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s call for a swerve away from “paranoid” toward “reparative” reading in her 2003 book Touching Feeling. Following on Sedgwick’s suggestion for a turn away from exposure as a reading protocol, my account of the history of queer feeling tends toward the descriptive rather than the critical. I have tried throughout to avoid the exposure of queer historical figures as “internally homophobic.” This charge could certainly be leveled against the authors (and a few of the critics) in my study; however, I tend to think with them rather than against them, identifying with rather than critiquing their refusals and their backwardness.

The danger of such an approach, of course, is that it is insufficiently distant from the kinds of thinking and feeling that are inimical to queer ways of life. One can be too close to one’s subject and simply repeat his or her mistakes. If I take this risk in Feeling Backward, it is because I do not think it is clear, even by the light of the post-Stonewall day, what would constitute a “mistaken” way of being or feeling queer. It is never easy to tell the difference between ideology and real life, and for a social identity like homosexuality, so saturated with negative ideology, tearing away the veil may leave us with very little. Sidestepping critique, my aim in Feeling Backward is to suggest the value of some aspects of historical gay identity—deeply ideological though they may be—that have been diminished or dismissed with successive waves of liberation. Central among these is the association between homosexual love and loss—a link that, historically, has given queers special insight into love’s failures and impossibilities (as well as, of course, wild hopes for its future).
Claiming such an association rather than disavowing it, I see the art of losing as a particularly queer art.

Impossible Love

Each chapter in this book considers a moment of failed or interrupted connection. Broken intimacies characterize the texts under consideration; they also might be said to define the relation between contemporary critics and the texts I consider. In making such failures central, I follow Leo Bersani's call in *Homos* for queer critics to confront the impossibility at the heart of desire. He writes of the need for a "theory of love" based not on our assertions of how different and how much better we are than those who would do away with us (because we are neither that different nor that much better), but one that would instead be grounded in the very contradictions, impossibilities, and antagonisms brought to light by any serious genealogy of desire."36 Although this book does not propose a "theory of love," it does take impossible love as a model for queer historiography.

*Feeling Backward* begins with a reconsideration of queer historiography by focusing on Michel Foucault's experience in the archive. Foucault's legacy to queer studies is most closely allied with his critique of identity and his development of the method of genealogy. Recently, Carolyn Dinshaw has explored his ambivalent investment in the queer past in her book *Getting Medieval*. Following on her work, I consider Foucault's method of genealogy in relation to his comment in a late interview about homosexual love: the best moment of an encounter is when you are putting the boy in the taxi. I take this moment of impossible connection as an emblem of Foucault's desire for a historical "real" that is always receding, always already lost.

One figure who has proved especially difficult to reach is Walter Pater, the late nineteenth-century novelist and essayist. Pater's position in a genealogy of queer authorship is awkward, mostly because he is understood to have lived "before" the invention of modern homosexuality; he participated in male homosexual and homoerotic circles that are not entirely legible under the rubric of twentieth-century homosexual community. Through his essays and novels devoted to homoerotic classical and early Christian relations, Pater's work offers a rich archive of queer historical structures of feeling. His attachment to the past makes him a

key figure for *Feeling Backward*. I also mean to draw attention to the reticence that characterizes his aesthetics. Pater imagines a form of rebellion that is sedate, retiring, shy—what he calls "the revolutionism of one who has slept a hundred years."37 Although such revolutionism does not count as revolutionism at all in contemporary understandings of the political, I argue that Pater offers a way to imagine a form of queer politics informed by the experience of homophobic exclusion. I trace the characteristic gesture of refusal or shrinking in his work to his resistance to newly public and explicit forms of homosexual identity and consider the problem of reaching out to queer historical figures who may be turning their backs on us.

Pater's shy refusals give way to the antimodernism and the explicit homophobia and misogyny of Willa Cather. The debates around Cather's lesbianism—Is she one? Does it matter?—have been acrimonious. In Joan Acocella's book *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, she decries feminist and queer scholars for reading Cather against her own explicit resistance to identification with women and with a newly public culture of homosexuality.38 I am also concerned with these aspects of Cather's writing; however, I argue that it is her resistance that makes a queer reading of her work unavoidable. Cather's queerness is bound up with her powerful disidentifications, her ambivalence, and her refusal of community. She is "one of ours" but she is not our own. This chapter reflects on the ethics of approaching Cather in light of that resistance. In particular, I consider her own approach to her precursor Sarah Orne Jewett as recorded in her essay "148 Charles Street." I understand this essay as Cather's reflection on the death of female romantic friendship as an affective and social mode; the regret and melancholy that suffuse the essay are bound up not only with the failing health of Jewett and her companion Annie Fields but also with Cather's own identification with a way of life that is passing from the world. I read Cather's desire to identify across an impossible historical divide in relation to contemporary critics' approach to Cather and consider the possibilities and shortcomings of friendship as a model for queer relations across time.

The next chapter, "Spoiled Identity," considers critical discomfort with *The Well of Loneliness*. Critics and readers over the past several decades have found this novel horribly depressing and have tended to dismiss this representation of the tragedy of the mannish woman as merely
ideological, the product of Radclyffe Hall’s self-hatred. I argue that this portrait of Stephen Gordon’s loneliness offers a crucial account of what it felt like to bear a newly public and newly stigmatized identity in the 1920s. In particular, Hall depicts the congenital invert as constituted by social rejection or refusal—in her words, as the bearer of “unwanted being.” This stark description of personhood made in the image of the other’s hatred has survived attempts to reread the novel as a narrative of heroic resistance; it constitutes an ongoing provocation to (and a drag on) contemporary utopian accounts of lesbian, butch, and transgender existence.

The final chapter considers the work of British novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner. I am particularly interested in Warner’s 1936 novel Summer Will Show, in which she imagines an improbable lesbian love affair against the backdrop of the failed 1848 revolution in Paris. The novel links the “impossibility” of lesbian love to the impossible object of revolutionary transformation. The novel ends as its heroine sits down to read The Communist Manifesto after the failure of the coup and the death of her lover. I argue that Warner describes a form of hope inseparable from despair, a structure of feeling that might serve as a model for political life in the present.

In the epilogue, I consider the importance of feeling backward in contemporary queer cultural production. I am interested in teasing out how this approach to the past might constitute an alternative form of politics in the present. As the revolutionary hope of earlier political generations has been exhausted, many on the Left have been searching for modes of resistance and coalition that respond to contemporary conditions. In response to the call to “Keep Hope Alive,” some have asked, “How might we make change even if we can’t muster hope?” I am particularly interested in the historical antecedents and political possibilities of projects like the Chicago-based feeltank. This group has attempted to mobilize negative feelings such as paranoia and despair in order to make social change; they have attempted to publicize events like the yearly depression march, where marchers wear bathrobes and slippers, pass out prescriptions for Prozac, and carry placards that say things like “Depressed? It might be political.”

Though bad feelings have been central to the history of queer experience and queer feeling, there is little room for them in the contemporary climate. Some new work in queer and cultural studies has taken up the politics of negative affect. I have been particularly influenced by work on gay shame (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, D. A. Miller, Douglas Crimp, Michael Warner); disidentification (José Esteban Muñoz); melancholia (David Eng); ugly feelings (Siânne Ngai); and trauma (Ann Cvetkovich). Such feelings resist the kind of idealist affirmation that is so attractive to a marginalized and despised social group. Perhaps closest to my own emphasis in this book is Anne Anlin Cheng’s work in The Melancholy of Race. Cheng explores a range of negative feelings produced by the experience of social exclusion, but her claims about the efficacy of these feelings are strikingly austere: sometimes damage is just damage. Queers are hated; we wish we were not; but wishing does not make it so.

While I do not argue for the political efficacy of any particular bad feeling in this book, I do argue for the importance of such feelings in general. Backward feelings serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world; they indicate continuities between the bad gay past and the present; and they show up the inadequacy of queer narratives of progress. Most important, they teach us that we do not know what is good for politics. It is true that the small repertoire of feelings that count as political—hope, anger, solidarity—have done a lot. But in this case a lot is not nearly enough.

Mixed Feelings

Queers face a strange choice: is it better to move on toward a brighter future or to hang back and cling to the past? Such divided allegiances result in contradictory feelings: pride and shame, anticipation and regret, hope and despair. Contemporary queers find ourselves in the odd situation of “looking forward” while we are “feeling backward.”

A particularly jarring version of this disjunction appears in Without You I’m Nothing, John Boskovitch’s 1989 film of Sandra Bernhard’s one-woman show. In one sequence, Bernhard takes on the persona of a homophobic straight man whose friend takes him to a gay bar. The scene is the 1970s, the height of both sexual liberation and the gay liberation movement. Bernhard’s character begins his monologue looking forward to a night on the town with his best bud and hoping to meet some Playboy bunnies; soon after climbing into his friend’s Camaro, he ends up in an unfamiliar part of town, following his friend into a bar with no girls—or not “his kind of girls” anyway. He notes a “couple dancing
together in the corner with flannel shirts and jeans, with big fat asses.” Initially frightened and disgusted by this scene, Bernhard’s character warms up quickly; within a few moments he is doing poppers and mixing with the locals. The story takes a sudden turn as Bernhard begins to play the tambourine, and three black leathermen magically appear at her side, back-up singers for her rendition of the Sylvester anthem “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real).” The conversion is complete a few moments later: Bernhard’s character gives himself sexually to a drag queen and likes it. In this absurdly sped-up sequence, racial fantasies of overpowering desire and authentic being effect a turn from hatred and shame to joy and self-revelation. The sad and lonely patrons of a back-street bar are transformed into luminous creatures “here to take you higher!”

This moment is absurd, and yet what is absurd about it is not its content but its pacing. The story is, after all, a familiar one: the movement from abjection to glorious community is the underlying structure of the story of coming out of the closet, and it informs both personal and collective histories of liberation. The origin story of gay liberation describes how on one particular night an underground bar turned into the front line of a struggle for freedom and civil rights. Early work in lesbian and gay studies was marked by the legacy of Stonewall and by the sudden turn of this moment of reverse discourse; the emergent field’s powerful utopianism, affirmation of gay identity, and hope for the future resonated with the seemingly magical power of this new movement to transmute shame into pride, secrecy into visibility, social exclusion into outsider glamour.

I do not think we can or should forego the strategy of reverse discourse, and I would not deny the power of queer alchemy. Our very dependence on this strategy demands, however, that we recognize how tenuous it is. We can turn shame into pride, but we cannot do so once and for all: shame lives on in pride, and pride can easily turn back into shame. We need to take as our starting point the reversibility of reverse discourse and to keep our gaze directed toward the past, toward the bad old days before Stonewall.

Although we cannot do away with the notion of progress, I want to attend more closely to what remains unthought in the turn toward the future. The commitment to affirmation should not shut down the possibility of the kind of radical intellectual experiments that gave birth to queer theory in the first place: Foucault’s challenge to the ideology of liberation; Cherrie Moraga’s attention to betrayal and sexual exposure in Loving in the War Years; Leo Bersani’s critique of the “culture of redemption”; Judith Butler’s gender trouble, which I take to mean not only acting up but also feeling bad.

These interventions are, I would argue, what has made queer studies “queer,” but the vibrations they set off are what is hardest to keep alive in queer studies as it ages. In 1993 Judith Butler wondered if the term “queer” would ever “overcome its constitutive history of injury.” It has not entirely, although its regular appearances in both college classrooms and on popular television shows suggest that it is moving in that direction. This book focuses on that history of injury. The links between the texts I consider and “urgent and expanding political purposes” tend to be oblique rather than direct. What counts as political in the contemporary context is, however, out of touch with the longer history of queer experience. Rather than disavowing the history of marginalization and abjection, I suggest that we embrace it, exploring the ways it continues to structure queer experience in the present. Modern homosexual identity is formed out of and in relation to the experience of social damage. Paying attention to what was difficult in the past may tell us how far we have come, but that is not all it will tell us; it also makes visible the damage that we live with in the present.

Criticism serves two important functions: it 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. It is crucial to find ways of creating and sustaining political hope. But hope that is achieved at the expense of the past cannot serve the future. The politics of optimism diminishes the suffering of queer historical subjects; at the same time, it blinds us to the continuities between past and present. As long as homophobia continues to centrally structure queer life, we cannot afford to turn away from the past; instead, we have to risk the turn backward, even if it means opening ourselves to social and psychic realities we would rather forget.

In her essay “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” Elizabeth Freeman considers the importance of melancholic identifications with
earlier moments of queer history, suggesting that the present is constituted through such identifications: "If identity is always in temporal drag, constituted and haunted by the failed love-project that precedes it, perhaps the shared culture-making projects we call 'movements' might do well to feel the tug backwards as a potentially transformative part of movement itself." This book feels that way. I am particularly attuned to the queer historical experience of failed or impossible love and have tried to make this feeling the basis for my own approach to the past. It is this disposition toward the past—embracing loss, risking abjection—that I mean to evoke with the phrase "feeling backward."

Such an emphasis is particularly important now, when the burdens of social exclusion are being significantly reduced. While it would be neither possible nor desirable to go back to an earlier moment in the history of gay and lesbian life, earlier forms of feeling, imagination, and community may offer crucial resources in the present. Attending to the specific histories of homophobic exclusion and violence—as well as their effects—can help us see structures of inequality in the present. It is also a way of claiming homosexual identity in the face of a call to abandon it. The invitation to join the mainstream is an invitation to jettison gay identity and its accreted historical meanings. Insofar as that identity is produced out of shame and stigma, it might seem like a good idea to leave it behind. It may in fact seem shaming to hold onto an identity that cannot be uncoupled from violence, suffering, and loss. I insist on the importance of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury. Resisting the call of gay normalization means refusing to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead.

Recently, long-standing debates about gay and lesbian history have shifted from discussions of the stability of sexual categories over time to explorations of the relation between queer historians and the subjects they study. The turn from a focus on "effective history" to a focus on "affective history" has meant that critics have stopped asking, "Were there gay people in the past?" but rather have focused on questions such as: "Why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past?" or even, perhaps, "What relation with these figures do we hope to cultivate?" Critics such as Christopher Nealon, Carolyn Dinshaw, Ann Cvetkovich, David Halperin, Carla Freccero, Scott Bravmann, Elizabeth Freeman, L. O. A. Fradenburg, and Valerie Traub have shifted the focus away from epistemological questions in the approach to the queer past; rather, they make central "the desires that propel such engagements, the affects that drive relationality even across time." Exploring the vagaries of cross-historical desire and the queer impulse to forge communities between the living and the dead, this work has made explicit the affective stakes of debates on method and knowledge. Mixing psychoanalytic approaches with more wide-ranging treatments of affect, they have traced the identifications, the desires, the longings, and the love that structure the encounter with the queer past.

My approach to queer history is profoundly indebted to this new field of inquiry. I focus on the negative affects—the need, the aversion, and
Notes

Introduction

1. In the debates over the turn from gay to queer, the politics of affirmation were central. See, for instance, this quote from the section of the 1990 pamphlet *Queers Read This* entitled “Why Queer?”: “Ah, do we really have to use that word? It’s trouble. Every gay person has his or her take on it. For some it means strange and eccentric and kind of mysterious. That’s okay, we like that. But some gay girls and boys don’t. They think they’re more normal than strange. And for others ‘queer’ conjures up those awful memories of adolescent suffering. Queer. It's forcibly bittersweet and quaint at best— weakening and painful at worst. Couldn’t we just use ‘gay’ instead? It’s a much brighter word and isn’t it synonymous with ‘happy’?” From *Queers Read This: I Hate Straights* (Leaflet distributed in June 1990 at a gay pride parade in New York City by Anonymous Queers). Reprinted in *The Columbia Reader on Lesbians and Gay Men in Media, Society and Politics*, ed. Larry Gross and James D. Woods (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 588–594.

2. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 101. Although the historian George Chauncey, Jr., and others have challenged Foucault’s account of the invention of homosexuality, pointing to nonelite sources of modern homosexual identity, the concept of reverse discourse remains central to contemporary queer thought and representation. Whether or not one agrees with Foucault’s historical narrative in detail, the implication that homosexual identity is reclaimed from social scorn still holds. Disqualification might come from above in the form of the medical attribution of pathology or it might come from below in the form of slurs and violence; in any case, though, insult retains its centrality in gay


6. Although critics have discussed the negativity of isolated texts or traditions, bad feelings run throughout—and might be said to define—queer representation. See, for instance, Catharine Stimpson’s discussion of the tradition of the “dying fall” in “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English,” Critical Inquiry 8 (1981): 363–379, and Christopher Nealon’s account of the literature of inversion in the introduction to Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 9–10. See also Carolyn Allen, Following Djuna: Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Leo Bersani, Homos (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Dianne Chisholm, Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Feelings of isolation, ambivalence, shame, and loneliness turn up not only in blistering works by the avant-garde or in maudlin accounts of homosexual tragedy: they are also legible in tales of triumph and fulfillment.


20. I have been influenced in my understanding of such transits between the individual and the social by Nealon's work on "feeling historical" in Foundlings. He suggests that we might think of "sexuality as a mode of address, as a set of relations, lived and imagined, that are perpetually cast out ahead of our 'real,' present-tense personhood, as a kind of navigation, or proleptic sketch of historical futures" (180). I discuss Nealon's work at greater length in Chapters 1 and 3.


26. Patricia White, *uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). See White's fascinating reading of the transition from connotation to denotation in Hollywood's representation of lesbianism. Analyzing the relation between *The Children's Hour* and Wyler's 1936 version of the Lillian Hellman play, *These Three*, White argues that because the prohibition on homosexuality in cinema also meant a ban against explicit representations of homophobia, the direct treatment of lesbianism in film often had disastrous consequences for screen lesbians like Martha. White aptly describes the ambivalence of the modern-day viewer toward such representations; "modern day viewers want to see Martha, but they don't want to see her dead." Many negative or stereotypical representations from the past have been reappropriated through the mode of camp. Today, cult images such as that of the lesbian vampire, the evil madam, or the butch prison warden have largely lost their negative charge, and are now more likely to provoke laughter than tears. Though it is never certain what makes some images and not others available for camp reappropriation, images that have been reclaimed tend to be those that reflect, in an excessive or ambivalent way, values that are acceptable or even desirable within the contemporary context. In a moment when butch style and hypersexuality are embraced within lesbian culture, spectacular figures such as these are not considered threatening or offensive. Through the mode of camp or hero worship, these once-debased figures are transformed into icons by subjects who recognize them as incomplete, premature, or distorted images of themselves. But certain images—of Martha Dobie on the couch, of Miss Kilman at the cafe in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, or of Stephen Gordon in front of the mirror in *The Well of Loneliness*—remain resistant to appropriation. See White's discussion of the complexity of lesbian reception in her reflections on "retrospectiveness" in the final chapter of *uninvited*.

27. All citations from *The Celluloid Closet* are from my transcription of the film, directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (1995).

28. While self-hatred and shame are themselves understood to be outmoded emotions in the current political situation, Bright reflects on the stubborn resistance of such feelings to narratives of progress. In a culture saturated by the discourse of pride, feelings of shame and self-hatred are themselves shaming. If such negative feelings were explicable within the hostile climate of the earlier part of the century, they seem inappropriate today; queer subjects who avow these feelings are subject to charges of "internalized homophobia.

29. There is of course a great deal of evidence one might muster to counter the claim that today girls like Martha universally "fight for their budding preference." On the significance of teen suicide, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); for an important critique of the use of the tragic teen as a grounding figure for queer theory, see Gordon, "Turning Back."


34. For a related reading of the anthomophobic possibilities of a psychoanalytic account of sexuality, see Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Dean argues that not only Lacan's interpreters but Lacan himself did not always see the most radical implications of his theories: "Lacan's axiom that 'there is no sexual relation' counters the heterosexual assumption of complementarity between genders; yet Lacan's explanations of this axiom are couched in terms of each gender's failure to relate to the other, rather than in terms of sexual relationality's failure as such, independent of gender." (17).

35. For an illuminating and contentious discussion of this tradition, see "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," published in 2006 in *PMLA*, which features short essays that came out of a panel at the 2005 MLA in Washington, DC. In this exchange, Robert L. Caserto (the convener of the original panel), Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean reflect on the ten-year anniversary of the publication of Leo Bersani's *Homos*. The thesis of Bersani's book, argued primarily through readings of Freud, Proust, Genet, and Gide, is that there is an inherent asociality in gay desire. "Forum: Conference Debates. The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory" *PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006): 819–828.


40. I take up the politics of negative affect at greater length in the epilogue. See David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Anne Anlin Cheng, The

6. In this caption, Barthes is citing Jacques Lacan, who defines the concept of demand as the demand for love. For Lacan too, demand constitutes a kind of hinge between desire and need. Before the moment of the mirror stage, the infant's need is still attached to objects and capable of satisfaction; once the child enters the realm of the symbolic, he becomes the subject of desire. Desire exists under the law of the signifier; it is radically detached from objects and can for this reason never be satisfied. Demand for Lacan is linked to the imaginary; it represents a moment when the subject is no longer a subject of need but is not yet a subject of desire.

7. The equivocal nature of this image is perhaps best evoked with reference to a linguistic slippage between the definitions of "demand"—"to ask for with authority, to claim as a right"—and "demanding"—"claiming more than is generally felt by others to be due" (The Random House College Dictionary, rev. ed.). It is interesting to note an obsolete meaning of "demand": "Countermand; opposition to a command, desire, or wish; demand" (Oxford English Dictionary). In this outdated sense of the word, demand is not an imperious order but rather a form of resistance or deferral.


9. For a point of comparison, see E. P. Thompson's great work of historical recovery, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Vintage, 1963/1966), 12–13. Thompson states in his preface that his aim in writing the book is to "rescue" the poor, deluded, obsolete, outmoded, and backward-looking workers of the Industrial Revolution, those "casualties of history" who threaten to be forgotten by the "enormous condescension of posterity." In the next paragraph, Thompson subtly changes course, suggesting that history's losers may not need us as much as we need them. Thompson argues that history should not be read "in the light of subsequent preoccupations": "after all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves. In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils we have yet to cure."


12. In such cross-historical relays, aging takes on tremendous importance as an embodied historical practice. Cf. Nealon's discussion in Foundlings of Gertrude Stein's assertion that it "takes time to make queer people" (23) as