

# Feeling Backward

*Loss and the Politics of Queer History*

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Heather Love

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This homosexual dream of perfect metaphysical union is not so much a reflected heterosexual ideal as it is the compensation for having wept in the darkness.

—Thomas Yingling, *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text*

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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 lesbian 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.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on injury in queer studies has made critics in this field more willing to investigate the darker aspects of queer representation and experience and to attend to the social, psychic, and corporeal 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 *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”; 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 religious 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 homophile movements: “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.”<sup>2</sup>

Homosexual identity is indelibly marked by the effects of reverse discourse: on the one hand, it continues to be understood as a form of damaged or compromised subjectivity; on the other hand, the characteristic 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 engage 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.<sup>5</sup>

This ambivalence is legible in responses to the saddest texts from the queer canon. Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel *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 repeated attacks by readers who have found it outdated, homophobic, depressing, and manipulative. At the same time, it is one of the most read and discussed of all queer novels. Despite complaints about their toxicity, 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 ambivalence tends to resolve itself into critique and gestures toward political 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> In their work, I pay particular attention to feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, 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.<sup>8</sup>

*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*."<sup>9</sup> 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

behind—and so seriously compromised the ability of these others ever to catch up. Not only sexual and gender deviants but also women, colonized people, the nonwhite, the disabled, the poor, and criminals were marked as inferior by means of the allegation of backwardness.

Aesthetic modernism is marked by a similar temporal splitting. While the commitment to novelty is undoubtedly a dominant feature of modernism, no account of the movement is complete without attention to the place of the nonmodern in the movement—whether in primitivism, in the concern with tradition, in widely circulating rhetorics of decadence and decline, or in the melancholia that suffuses so many modernist artworks. Even when modernist authors are making it new, they are inevitably grappling with the old: backwardness is a feature of even the most forward-looking modernist literature. It is generally only when authorial ambivalence toward modernization is unmistakable that an author is named antimodernist. Yet the distinction between modernist and antimodernist seems far too crude to capture the historical ambivalence of most texts in the period.

This historical ambivalence is particularly charged, I want to suggest, in the works of minority or marginal modernists. For those marked as temporally backward, the stakes of being identified as modern or nonmodern were extremely high. Reading for backwardness is a way of calling attention to the temporal splitting at the heart of all modernism; at the same time, I attempt to describe the representational strategies of modern authors who were, in various ways, marked as backward. *Feeling Backward* focuses on queer modernism and on the fate of gender and sexual outsiders more generally. Still, I hope to suggest how attention to backward modernism might be helpful in exploring the aesthetic strategies of modernity's others.<sup>10</sup>

Whether understood as throwbacks to an earlier stage of human development or as children who refuse to grow up, queers have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow also recall the past.<sup>11</sup> They carry with them, as Djuna Barnes writes of her somnambulist heroine Robin Vote in *Nightwood*, “the quality of the ‘way back.’”<sup>12</sup> The association of homosexuality with loss, melancholia, and failure runs deep; psychoanalytic accounts of arrested development and representations of the AIDS crisis as a gay death wish represent only a couple of notable variations on this theme. Given

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

*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).<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup>

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 denigration and dismissal of queer existence. One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it—the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, 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 humiliations 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 together traditionally polarized terms such as the psychic and the social, subject and structure, politics and loss, affect and law, and love and history. You can see this yoking together of heterogeneous things in several recent titles: *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*; “Feeling Brown”; *The Melancholy of Race*; *Racial Castration*; *Melancholia and Moralism*; *The Psychic Life of Power*. A question hangs over this new body of work: what if psychic 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 forgetting 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

# Emotional Rescue

## *The Demands of Queer History*

Take history at night; have you ever thought of that, now? Was it at night that Sodom became Gomorrah? It was at night, I swear! A city given over to the shades, and that's why it has never been countenanced or understood to this day.

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

the longing—that characterize the relation between past and present. This decision to look on the dark side comes out of my sense that contemporary critics tend to describe the encounter with the past in idealizing terms. In particular, the models that these critics have used to describe queer cross-historical relations—friendship, love, desire, and community—seem strangely free of the wounds, the switchbacks, and the false starts that give these structures their specific appeal, their binding power. Friendship and love have served as the most significant models for thinking about how contemporary critics reach out to the ones they study. I would like to suggest that more capacious and de-idealized accounts of love and friendship would serve to account for the ambivalence and violence of the relation to the past—to what is most queer in that relation. Today, many critics attest that since Stonewall the worst difficulties of queer life are behind us. Yet the discomfort that contemporary queer subjects continue to feel in response to the most harrowing representations from the past attests to their continuing relevance. The experience of queer historical subjects is not at a safe distance from contemporary experience; rather, their social marginality and abjection mirror our own. The relation to the queer past is suffused not only by feelings of regret, despair, and loss but also by the shame of identification.

In attempting to construct a positive genealogy of gay identity, queer critics and historians have often found themselves at a loss about what to do with the sad old queens and long-suffering dykes who haunt the historical record. They have disavowed the difficulties of the queer past, arguing that our true history has not been written. If critics do admit the difficulties of the queer past, it is most often in order to redeem them. By including queer figures from the past in a positive genealogy of gay identity, we make good on their suffering, transforming their shame into pride after the fact. I understand this impulse not only as a widespread but as a structural feature of the field, a way of counteracting the shame of having a dark past.<sup>3</sup>

### Someone Will Remember Us

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes writes that “the discourse of Absence is a text with two ideograms: there are the raised arms of Desire, and there are the wide-open arms of Need. I oscillate, I vacillate between

the phallic image of the raised arms, and the babyish image of the wide-open arms.”<sup>4</sup> Barthes construes the relation between desire and need as consecutive: the lover vacillates between two different responses to absence. It is striking to note, however, how often these images converge. Desire in its most infantile, its most reduced state is difficult to distinguish from need; need in its most tyrannical form nearly approaches the phallic image of desire. Barthes offers an image of such convergence in the photograph of himself as a boy in his mother’s arms reproduced at the beginning of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. The caption reads, “The demand for love.”<sup>5</sup> For Barthes, the notion of “demand” captures the close link between need and desire.<sup>6</sup> In this photograph, the young Barthes offers an image of the demanding child, that slumped, pathetic figure who nonetheless manages to press his needs home with real force.<sup>7</sup>

If this photograph reveals the adult force of childish need, we can call to mind many examples that reveal the babyish element in adult desire. Think, for instance, of the sneering, sulking pout of that consummate erotic bully, Mick Jagger. In almost any song by the Rolling Stones, the call to “just come upstairs” gets its heat not only from the authority of the desiring father but also from the hunger of the prodigal son. In “Emotional Rescue,” for instance, macho posturing shades into schoolboy whining as Jagger intersperses deep-voiced promises to be your “knight in shining armor,” to “come to your emotional rescue,” with half-mumbled assertions that last night he was “crying like a child, like a child.” In the chorus, Jagger gives us the cry itself: “You will be mine, mine, mine, mine, mine, all mine / You could be mine, could be mine, / Be mine, all mine.” In the infantile repetition of the possessive, one hears the pathetic cry of the child who is not in a position to own anything.<sup>8</sup>

You will be mine; you could be mine—but you probably won’t be mine. This combination of demand and desperation characterizes the relation to the gay past. But queer critics tend to disavow their need for the past by focusing on the heroic aspect of their work of historical recovery. Like many demanding lovers, queer critics promise to rescue the past when in fact they dream of being rescued themselves.

In imagining historical rescue as a one-way street, we fail to acknowledge the dependence of the present on the past. Contemporary critics tend to frame the past as the unique site of need, as if the practice of history

were not motivated by a sense of lack in the present. We might conceive of the work of historical affirmation not, as it is often presented, as a lifeline thrown to those figures drowning in the bad gay past, but rather as a means of securing a more stable and positive identity in the present.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, such acts of resolve allow us to ignore the resistance of queer historical figures to our advances toward them.

In order to better describe how this fantasy works, I consider an exchange between the Greek poet Sappho and one of her most rapt modern readers. Anne Carson offers the following version of one of Sappho's lyrics: "Someone will remember us / I say / even in another time."<sup>10</sup> Sappho's poem offers to its audience what sounds like foreknowledge: "Someone will remember us." The prediction seems to have the simple status of truth, but the "I say" at the center of this lyric attests to the longing and uncertainty that is the poem's motive and its subject. In making the prediction more emphatic, "I say" tips the hand of the speaker, shows this prophecy to be a matter of wishful thinking. The speaker protects her audience from the unpredictability of the future by means of a personal guarantee; the "I" of the poem offers its auditors a shelter from oblivion. (One of the uncanny aspects of the poem is its ability to offer this consolation—in person, as it were—not only to its immediate audience but also to its future readers.)

The sheer density of longing in this short poem is striking. Crack the shell of its confident assertion of immortality and questions emerge: "Can one be remembered in one's absence?" "When I leave the room, will you still think about me?" "Will we be remembered after death?" The poem answers "yes": "Someone will remember us / I say / even in another time." The speaker promises her audience that they will be thought of not only tomorrow, or the day after, but "in another time," and by strangers. Sappho's lyric promises memory across death: once we and everyone we know and everyone who knows us is dead, someone is still going to think about us. We will be in history.

This fragment offers a nearly irresistible version of what queer subjects want to hear from their imagined ancestors. It is what Christopher Nealon refers to in *Foundlings* as the "message in the bottle" dispatched from the queer past—sent seeking a "particular historical kind of after-life," "some historical 'other' place" where "the unspeakability" of same-sex love "can gain audition" (182). For the early twentieth-century lesbian poet Renée Vivien, Sappho's poetry was just such a message in a bottle. In order to read it, she learned Greek and began obsessively translating

and expanding Sappho's fragments and even traveled to the island of Lesbos with her lover Natalie Clifford Barney to recreate the legendary school for girls. In her 1903 volume *Sappho*, Vivien offers translations and expansions of Sappho's fragmentary lyrics that take up themes of tormented desire, isolation, and lost love in the originals and amplify the historical resonances in them.

Vivien's attention to the vulnerability of cross-historical contacts is legible in her version of "Someone will remember us."

Quelqu'un, je crois, se souviendra dans  
l'avenir de nous.

Dans les lendemains que le sort file et tresse,  
Les êtres futurs ne nous oublieront pas . . .  
Nous ne craignons point, Atthis, ô ma Maîtresse!  
L'ombre du trépas.

Car ceux qui naîtront après nous dans ce monde  
Où râlent les chants jetteront leur soupir  
Vers moi, qui t'aimais d'une angoisse profonde,  
Vers toi, mon Désir.

Les jours ondoyants que la clarté nuance,  
Les nuits de parfums viendront éterniser  
Nos frémissements, notre ardente souffrance  
Et notre baiser.

[Someone, I believe, will remember us  
in the future.

In the tomorrows that fate spins and weaves,  
Those who come after us will not forget us . . .  
We have no fear, O, Atthis my Mistress!  
Of the shadow of death.

Because those who are born after us in this world  
Filled with death-cries will cast their sighs  
Toward me, who loved you with deep anguish,  
Toward you, my Desire.

The wavering days that the clear light limns  
And the perfumed night will render eternal  
Our tremblings, our ardent suffering,  
And our kiss.]<sup>11</sup>

Although “making the moment last” is a commonplace of the Western lyric tradition, this trope takes on tremendous weight in Vivien’s rewritings of Sappho’s lyrics. The promise of immortality that is associated with the aesthetic is put to work here as a bulwark against historical isolation and social exclusion. How can connections across time be forged out of fear and erotic torments? Vivien compares the transformation of fleeting moments into tradition to the way that “les jours ondoyants” make up an eternity even though they are made of nothing more substantial than light and shade. In this comparison, a love that is fleeting and filled with anguish becomes eternal simply by aging—by being continually exposed to the light of day and the perfumed shades of night.<sup>12</sup> Vivien also invokes a specifically erotic mystery: how the experience of shared erotic suffering, obsession, and anxiety can add up to eternal devotion.

Of course, it is not assured that such torments do lead to eternal devotion (just as it is not assured that the messages cast out in bottles ever get read). The fantasy of permanence is, however, the central conceit of the poem and it represents the deepest wish of Sappho’s lonely historical correspondent. Vivien makes true love the model for cross-historical fidelity, and, speaking in Sappho’s voice, promises recognition. Taking up the role of adoring lover, Vivien answers Sappho’s call, leaving no doubt that someone in another time would in fact think of her. Through such a response, Vivien seems to rescue Sappho—to repair the torn fragments of her text, and to stitch up the gap in the temporal fabric that her lyric address opens. But it is clear that by translating Sappho Vivien was working against the profound sense of alienation and historical isolation that she felt at the turn of the twentieth century. By coming to Sappho’s rescue, Vivien manages to rescue herself. She enters history by becoming Sappho’s imagined and desired “someone.”<sup>13</sup>

Although many cast queer historical subjects in the role of Sappho—as lonely, isolated subjects in search of communion with future readers—I want to suggest that it makes sense to see ourselves in the role of Vivien. That is to say, contemporary queer subjects are also isolated, lonely subjects looking for other lonely people, just like them. Vivien finds in Sappho an almost perfect interlocutor; the echo chamber in which she replayed Sappho’s fragments afforded profound satisfactions. But few encounters with the queer past run so smoothly. These texts rarely express

such a perfect longing for rescue and are often characterized by a resistance to future readers and to the very idea of community. We do encounter some texts that say, “Someone will remember us / I say / even in another time.” But some of these lost figures do not want to be found. What then?

### *Noli Me Tangere*

Carolyn Dinshaw’s book, *Getting Medieval*, investigates the affective dynamics of queer history. Dinshaw focuses on the metaphors of touch in the relation of contemporary critics to the medieval past; she explores the “strange fellowships” and the “partial connections” that link queer subjects across time. Through such connections, queer subjects build an imagined community of the marginal and the excluded. By trying to create relations across time, Dinshaw follows what she calls “a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other hand, those left out of current sexual categories now. Such an impulse extends the resources for self- and community building into even the distant past” (1). Rather than seeing herself as the heroic savior of the past, Dinshaw puts herself into relation with it, describing her own desires for “partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time” (21).

The longing for community across time is a crucial feature of queer historical experience, one produced by the historical isolation of individual queers as well as by the damaged quality of the historical archive. Like Dinshaw, Christopher Nealon surveys these desires for connection across time in *Foundlings* through his accounts of the “affect-genealogies” and “hopeful analogies” to other historical forms of community in twentieth-century queer (or “foundling”) texts. It makes sense to consider these works in affective historiography within the context of larger efforts in queer studies to describe or invent new models of queer community and coalitional politics: nonbiological inheritance, new forms of kinship, “the friendship ethic,” queer families, stigma- or shame-based alliances, and so on.<sup>14</sup> This work on new forms of queer community has been generative. At the same time, others working in queer studies have been critical of the concept of community. In *Against the Romance of Community*,