

Forget Theory: In Praise of Psychoanalysis's Queerness

Diego Costa*

“Let’s not speak of a voyage or an adventure – too novelistic...No, we sense only, analyst and patient, that a crossing begins, ours, without knowing too much what the ship carries in its hold – treasures and explosives --, without possessing maps to assure us that the route taken is the best one, without guarantee that we will arrive at the right port. Can we speak of the ‘direction of the cure’ when we do not know where it actually leads?”

- J.B. Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas*

Although a great part of Queer theorists’ work has been woven through and against psychoanalytic theory, the notion that the fundamentals of psychoanalysis are normativizing, homogenizing, pathologizing, apolitical, and thus anti-queer or not-queer-enough, has been just as present.ⁱ And yet, psychoanalysis is queer. We don’t have to queer it. Its queerness is already there, in its mechanism, its goals, its principles, its language, its flexibility, its history, its ruptures, its multi-valence, and mostly, for its relationship between theory and practice – from the beginning. Its queerness is there despite the tendency of even the most, well, queer academics to mistake metaphor for literality, to cling on to bumper-sticker reductions of its principles, to refuse close readings of the original works, to surrender to the comfort of misreadings that foreclose through a lack of imagination, and an overall fondness for embarking on disciplinary trends and academic truthinessⁱⁱ.

This fundamental facet of the psychoanalytic, its force as a queer and queering process is condensed quite clearly in Eric Laurent’s “Guiding

* Diego Costa is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Interdivisional Program of Media Arts and Practice (iMap) at the University of Southern California. His research interests include Lacanian psychoanalysis, queer theory, childhood studies, digital humanities, and experimental cinema.

Principles for Any Psychoanalytic Act,” the second of which states such act as an essentially anti-identitarian one, “A psychoanalytic session is the place in which the most stable identifications by which a subject is attached can come undone.” The psychoanalytic act undoes identity precisely because it must take into account the radical specificity of the Subject in analysis, namely the analysand who addresses the analyst, who takes nothing but the singularity of the first into account. Considering that an analyst does not identify with any of the roles that the analysand may project at her, and that she “cannot be assigned to any other place than the place where desire is in question,” the scene of analysis is, by definition, deconstructive, unsettling, queering. It refuses the homogeneity and stillness inherent to the very notion of the category.ⁱⁱⁱ

The issue of the specificity of the Subject is key in tracing the similarities of intentions, directions, or vectors, between the Queer and the psychoanalytic in that while the first tends to mistrust or see the category, at best, as a strategic essentialism, standing in for a queerness that must be universal (and universally different), the latter’s very “tailor made” process is contingent to the same logic. “There is no standard treatment, no general procedure by which psychoanalytic treatment is governed,” Laurent continues in his fifth principle for any psychoanalytic act, before noting that the experience of a psychoanalysis has only one regularity, “that of the originality of the scenario through which all subjective singularity emerges. Psychoanalysis is therefore not a technique but a discourse which encourages each person to produce his [sic] singularity, his [sic] exception.” And while Queer Theory has been so diligent about working to guarantee a pivotal place for race and class, an activist theory striving for radical material consequences, it has too often done so at the expense of the unconscious, and by resistance to see that what begins “in relation to the father ends in relation to the community.”^{iv} While this critical strategy may assuage anxieties around the privilege of the academic, the intellectual, or the thinker, and “white guilt,” it runs the risk of turning class and race into objects of fetishism, standing in for the anxieties that help trigger the will to theorize this way, thus erasing the individual.^v

Psychoanalysis has fashioned itself not through the queerness of “queer people” but with the queerness of the Subject tout court, the queerness toward which the human Subject leans. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, for instance, Freud argues that, “each one of us behaves in some respect like the paranoiac, “substituting a wish-fulfillment for some aspect of the world which is unbearable to him, and carrying this delusion through into reality.

(...) Needless to say, no one who shares a delusion recognizes it as such.” Freud then argues that when a large number of people make this attempt of delusion together “and try to obtain assurance of happiness and protection from suffering by a delusional transformation of reality it acquires special significance.” The obvious examples here may be “the religions of humanity,” which Freud goes on to cite, as well as fascism, especially considering the book’s publication date of 1930. But we can certainly extrapolate the logic to the concept of capitalism (its way of, like religion, “circumscribing choice and adaptation by urging upon everyone alike its single way of achieving happiness and guarding against pain (...) by the forcible imposition of mental infantilism”) and heterosexuality, along with the mandates for exclusivity that go along with it -- and which psychoanalysis will deem the epitome of perversion (i.e. marriage by contract).^{vi}

Queerness is thus contingent to a theory that aims to recognize the structure of one’s Desire. In questions of Desire, of which the hyper-“practical” Americanization of psychoanalytic principles (including, but not reduced to Ego Psychology) is guilty of indifference, miscomprehension and profit-driven butchering (in clinical practice and public perception), queerness is the starting point. The vibrant elasticity of queerness as I understand it, queer as the active unit of recognition of desire (which is oceanic and exceeds any attempts at linguistic seizure), the queerness that serves as latent framework for psychoanalysis’ often misread manifestations, is certainly the only guarantee the psychoanalytic (as a scene, a process, a project, a temporality, a discourse) can offer. The human subject is bound to queerness because desire is queer.

Ignoring the specificity of psychoanalysis as a theory, as a practice, and the dynamic between the first and the latter is an equivocation under the guise of an epistemological maturation – psychoanalysis has had its moment, we are beyond it now -- that a project that calls itself Queer Theory cannot afford. If Queer theorists are really willing to invest in, or cathect, the classroom (in all of its ever-growing variations) not as a “safe space,” but as a dangerous site where absolutely nothing is immune to deconstructing doubt and productive/destructive unsettling, we must be willing to recognize the unconscious as, still and despite, the fundamental *fons et origo* from which the various relationships between Subject and object (human interaction) gain shape, tone, direction and texture.^{vii} Realizing such premise and not going back to Freud and the terrific psychoanalytic work that has been done after him denounces, at the very least, a self-entitled luxury of non-humility

antithetical to a project that wants to say anything about gender, sexuality, and the body.

It may, in fact, take an experience of analysis itself in order for the (Queer theorist) self to grasp, in situ, as it were, the peculiar way that psychoanalytic theory becomes practice, and vice versa – and how the dynamic made possible by the clinical experience can do away with anti-queer assumptions regarding psychoanalysis. Eric Laurent synthesizes this sentiment perfectly in a recent interview in the Argentine newspaper *Clarín*:

Psychoanalysis doesn't produce good news. It doesn't promise immediate happiness. But, mostly importantly, it is not a science. And the system of the dominant discourse is science. Psychoanalysis is a critical discipline that recognizes the effects of science. It is the discourse that comments on the effects of science about civilization. And about subjects, one by one. But the certainties of psychoanalysis are also criticized, hated, rejected, because it cannot be reached outside of the analytical cure.^{viii}

Laurent's notion that whatever it is that psychoanalysis has to offer is achieved "one by one" is extremely important because unlike any other "critical discipline" psychoanalysis has the luxury of constant interaction with the subjects of which it speaks (and whom speak to it), a luxury that may just "cure" some of the ills that are inherent to the generalizations that inevitably accompany any kind of theory-making, or language in general. Psychoanalysis is, then, perhaps unlike any other theory-practice endeavor, dependent on the singularity of the human subject whilst its Theory is being made, un-made and re-made – at once. Science, which "doesn't presuppose any singular experience" from the subjects it considers, presumes reason and calculation, while psychoanalysis cannot decide, contrary to popular belief, what its aims are "in terms of an adaptation of a subject's singularity to any norms, rules, determinations, or standards of reality. (...) It is up to each person to invent a particular solution, one that builds on his [sic] symptom." Psychoanalysis, especially vis-à-vis the omnipresent rhetoric of Science, thus builds off of its awareness of the incurable ("there will always be something that fails"),^{ix} occupying the "queer space of the immigrant".^x It is worth remembering here Valerie Traub's piece of advice to Queer theorists, "Know who your real enemies are."^{xi}¹

Acknowledging such conjecture seems especially urgent in a "connectionist world that is already ours but in which deeply alienating

novelties escape the anachronism of critical frameworks that are still in circulation.” Annie Le Brun wonders why we aren’t more disturbed by the general offensive against psychoanalysis, which works to prop up facile scientificist assumptions about emotion, behavior, and health (desire isn’t even considered, or remembered) that lead to successful institutional, mediatic and medical industries.^{xii} This symptomatic forgetting of the unconscious as something other than the inextinguishably present, or its misplacement somewhere other than at the forefront of any critical analysis of desiring subjects contributes to “this caricatural simplification of the human person” – a pre-requisite for projects of oppression, regulation, and normativization.^{xiii}

Of course, just recognizing Desire as fundamental to critical analyses of gender and sexuality isn’t enough. As disheveled as the mind may appear, it is governed by firm rules.^{xiv} And psychoanalysis arms itself with a method of recognition of its dynamic and logic, a method as bendable as Desire itself – which is bent with, through and against each particular Subject in analysis (“one by one”).

Even a book that seems to lie somewhat apart from Freud’s most well known writings like “Jokes and Their Relation to The Unconscious” is laden with what we can think of as a blueprint for what has and what is yet to come for Queer Theory. In Peter Gay’s “Freud A Brief Life,” which opens the 1989 edition of the book, he notes Freud’s “bent as an unbeliever” (xi), his relationship to failure as a stepping stone to maturation of thought (xv), the importance of attentive readings of the original texts as well as their “reanalyses” (xv) in order to speak of Freud with any kind of authority.^{xv} Gay also notes Freud’s tendency toward what we may call today “interdisciplinarity,” the very space that has made Queer Theory possible, as he “broke out of the circumscribed bounds of clinical and theoretical specialization by publishing papers on religion, literature, sexual mores, biography, sculpture, prehistory, and much else (...). Freud took all of culture as his province.” Gay’s mentioning of the evolution of Freud’s thought on the theoretical significance of aggression is also noteworthy in dispelling with charges of psychoanalysis’ theoretical insularity, as this came about largely by the way in which World War I “confirmed the skeptical psychoanalytic appraisal of human nature.”^{xvi}

Discussing “the sexual aberrations” in the “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” first published in 1905, Freud creates a kind of ontological

admixture between the pathological and the healthful. Although at first it may seem like Freud is reinforcing those binaries, he constantly confounds one putative extremity with the other, drawing them together, wrestling with them not as parallel simultaneities, but in a relationship of mottled dynamism. Here sadists are also masochists, perversion is always a part, if not the fabric, of healthy sexuality, and every normal individual, male or female, has traces of the opposite sex. I read Freud's sometimes biology-centered rhetoric (in this particular text he speaks of evolution, atrophy, and the organic) much more as metaphor, and an attempt to craft a legitimate kind of legibility for his readers, than a lens – a strategic mode of writing, not a mode of thinking. The crux of Freud's arguments all seem to place nuance, variegation, multiplicity, ambiguity, hybridity, and doubt at their forefront. They not only allow re-signification, re-signification is at once their starting point and their imagined destination. "If we cannot see things clearly we will at least see clearly what the obscurities are." xvii

Whilst establishing pathology as a matter of degree, and not kind, one of Freud's most distinctive moves in "Three Essays" is pointing not only to the porosity of the supposed borders between subjectivities and subjects, but to the notion of what we may call queerness as universal. Freud introduces strangeness as constitutive to the human person. Dissymmetry and contradiction as the condition for subjectivity and Desire's coming to be. Lacan will later speak of a subjective split: at the same time that the Subject wants something, she also doesn't (a radical distancing from the supposed "indivisible" subject of Science, both medical and social).^{xviii} While Freud spends a lot of time explaining distinctions between the normal and the pathological, he constantly shuffles the categories, dragging normality into the pathological mud and outing normality as naturalized convention. Normality and pathology become realms of ideality, a kind of toolbox that goes into the formation of every Subject and has absolutely no inevitable relationship to the labels their contents may hold. This isn't done just when it comes to neurosis, psychosis, and perversion (we are, at the very least, just neurotic, which levels the playing field), but in regards to the unquestionable bedrock-ness of heterosexuality itself, "Thus from the point of view of psycho-analysis the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem that needs elucidating and is not a self-evident fact based upon an attraction that is ultimately of a chemical nature." According to this logic, homosexuality itself is also "a problem" in its lack of self-evidence, since it involves object-choice exclusivity as well, albeit of an inverted kind. Both binaries become ways to color-in the amorphousness of queerness, which is too slippery, fluid, expansive, and complicated for language to hold.

The notion that the normal and the pathological are cut out of the same fabric remains throughout Freud's works, including a less popular volume that shares the similar un-poetic tone of "Three Theories." In "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety," first published in 1926, Freud exposes the absurdity of systems of thought that map certain kinds of value onto certain kinds of material bodies necessarily. This exposure is, of course, and like so many Freudian concepts, the perfect raw material for Queer Theory to craft its own project of debunking naturalized inevitabilities. In Freud's further illustration of how democratic the queerness of the human subject is (how otherness lies on the inside too, if not mostly -- if not only), obsessional neurosis is described as "only overdoing" of normal methods of "getting rid of the Oedipal complex." And as if pre-emptying one of Judith Butler's most familiar claims (with some echoes of Sontag and Foucault), "every exaggeration contains the seed of its own undoing." Pathology, in this case in the form of obsession, already appears as a site where normality is discovered – as sham, or fairy-tale.^{xix}

It's also important to note how Freud's categories are often described as tendencies, more so than inscriptions, leaving room for queer extrapolations around the instability of desire that identity categories try their hand at masking.^{xx} And how psychoanalysis as a shifting theory-practice dialogue is inherently bound to have to deal with the chasms and lacunae between the Subject theorized and the Subject lived – through speech. Freud leaves his conceptual frameworks quite open to transformation, contradiction, and aggregation while in order to preserve their very alive-ness. The theoretical constructions of "the hysteric," "the paranoid," or "the narcissist" are forced to open up their pores, breath, and absorb anew as they (re-) encounter the Subject in the scene of analysis, which is a space where contradictions both refuse and enact, prove and contest, complicate and transform the theory. Theory is allowed to be bruised, beaten, chiseled, broken, maimed, lost, and, most significantly, contaminated by what it sees, what it hears, and what it doesn't.

The most basic premise of analysis, after all, is the idea that self-recognition of one's structure of desire can afford the Subject a mobility of their condition, a mobility for their condition, a possibility for giving up positionalities that don't seem interesting upon their, well, identification. Identification becomes a mode of overcoming it, a way of understanding in order to do away with it. It's a re-directing of the Subject's tendency, a re-organizing of the values attached to objects thus far, a general re-

arrangement of the vectors that form the Subject right now. The theory of the analyst (which undergirds and enables the scene) and the practice (of desire) of the analysand are both driven by their impending transformations, their looming deaths.

The scene of analysis, in its regular rhythmic repetition, is an unrehearsed acting out of the constitutive queerness of the Subject, the one(s) in the room and the one(s) who came before them. The ghosts are all there. It is a scene of unsettling discoveries and constant re-shuffling, both unexpected and familiar encounters with the self and the other, not only for the analysand, but for the Theory itself, which bends, crooks and curves to adapt to that particular Subject, that particular History, at that particular time. Lacan's advice for analysts in the scene of analysis was: forget theory.

Freud explains the pleasure principle itself in terms of a tendency toward it (toward the pleasure and toward the theory), a tendency that is always at odds with other tendencies, "so that the final outcome cannot always be in harmony with the tendency toward pleasure." He cites Gustav Fechner when explaining that any tendency toward an aim is not necessarily attained, and if it is, it "is attainable only by approximations..."^{xxi} Tendencies, as a general rule, then, fail. And it is the trajectory to that failure, as well as one we do with its aftermath, that enables Freud to come up with certain references, or names, or tags, none of which are stable, none of which are absolute. Their potential for transmutation is precisely what makes analysis possible, or worthwhile. Queer Theory has certainly made great use of this constancy of subjective failure, from Butler's first essays on the lacuna between repetition (the repetition that makes the visualization of identities possible) as the space for something to go "wrong" or "other," to Judith Halberstam's most recent work on failure as a particularly queer mode of radical refusal.^{xxii}

With its constant fort/da-like flow of remembering and forgetting theory, using and misusing it, taking advantage of its failures, setting up and putting on theory into a scene (that is alive and spoken by laymen and experts -- at the same time, in the same room), there is no mode of thought and contemplation, inquiry and deconstruction, perception and narrativization, engagement and awakening, detection and exposure, unsettling and binding, intellectualization and being queerer than psychoanalysis', and the development of Queer Theory, its goals and its branches, are ultimately really familiar to the psychoanalytic project.

Heather Love's suggestions in "Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History" that Queer Theory return to a past stripped off of the romantic hopes for creating communities across time (affect-genealogies) along with her seeking the ambiguity of affect in the past through close readings of early 20th Century lesbian novels has everything to do with Freud's distinction between fear and fright, for example. Fear requires a defined object of which to be afraid, here anxiety can be used to expect such defined danger. Fright, however, is the state one finds oneself in when running into a danger one wasn't prepared for. We can link this unpreparedness to psychoanalysis' ultimate goal of liberating the subject to its own alterity and the alterity of the other – what Lucien Israël, in relation to the Subject vis-à-vis the Other, calls the possibility of trans-narcissistic love (the opposite of the pervert's meticulously scripted Other). We can also relate this possibility for a love that is willing to have what the other actually has and is able to give to Love's project of "going backward," a move without hope for some kind of hagiographic salvation but with the pores wide open to encounter, to run into, the failure, ugliness, pain, anxiety and shame that have helped architect one's structure of desire right now.

Although the principles underpinning Love's project seem rather close to psychoanalysis' reason for being in her imagining a "backward future" through the freedom-producing (re-) visiting and recognition of the subject's history of injury, she certainly distances herself from psychoanalysis stressing its considerations of homosexuality as a failure of maturation and its "diagnostic reading practice," while she favors instead a descriptive approach. Yet describing is precisely all the analysand does, as she recounts dreams, memories, anecdotes, and feelings. The interpretation, the analysis, the moment of fright, the encounter with the unaccounted-for object, the running into the unexpected line, the running out of the ready-made stories, the running against language through language, these all happen through live description, through the realm of the lie in which speaking lives, as Lacan might say. The analysand's relationship to this description is also precisely one filled with the kinds of "bad" affects Love argues we should be open to. One could say, in fact, that what constitutes the scene of analysis is a regressive destruction or re-imagining of the Subject's history, a demystification of the stories of cohesion and coherence we have been telling ourselves, a series of unexpected encounters with the ugly, the terrifying, the painful and the suspect. At a time of digital networks, virality, gadgets, toys, and other devices that help us "feel back" into some of the primal pleasures of early infancy, it becomes especially urgent to think psychoanalytically, thus

queerly, about the active web of tendencies between the Subject and her new (old?) objects.^{xxiii}

“(...) a puzzle, perhaps, but without a ‘motif’ to follow and without a ‘rosebud’ in the end; a rail network, if you will, but under the condition that new tracks open up, that there be stops, signaling errors and even derauling mistakes; a nervous system without a center.”

J.B. Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas*

Notes

ⁱ From Gayle Rubin’s questioning why analysts did not “argue for novel arrangements, instead of rationalizing the old ones” to Hanne Blank’s claims that Freud, who “accepted without reservation that heterosexuality existed,” was also a “simplistic [!] and a highly critical thinker when it came to heterosexuality.” Queer Theory being a contested non-discipline, I am referring to texts often used in university classes and seminars in which Queer Theory is thought to be developed/analyzed/written. Hanne Blank, *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012). 28. Rubin, Gayle. “*The Traffic of Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.*” In *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (Routledge, 1997), p. 51.

ⁱⁱ Freud seems to paint a picture of an imagined Queer future when he writes, “Let us suppose this were also to be removed by instituting complete liberty in sexual life, so that the family, the germ cell of culture, ceased to exist; one could not, it is true, foresee the new paths on which cultural development might then proceed, but one thing one would be bound to expect and that is that the ineffaceable feature of human nature would follow wherever it led.” *Civilization and Its Discontents*, New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 2011), p. 89.

ⁱⁱⁱ The psychoanalyst herself, despite Freud’s initial claims for a psychoanalyst identity, is composed of too many contradicting components to sustain an identity. “The very success of psychoanalysis, its internationalization, the multiple generations that have followed one another for over a century have shown how illusory this definition of a psychoanalytic identity is,” Laurent says. Eric Laurent, “Guiding Principles for Any Psychoanalytic Act,” *Lacan.com*, accessed May 15, 2012. <http://www.lacan.com/ericlaurent.html>

^{iv} *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 121.

^v This Freudian insight seems appropriate, “Human life in communities only becomes possible when a number of men unite together in strength superior to any single individual and remain united against *all* single individuals.” My emphasis. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 59.

^{vi} Freud later asks why it is so hard for mankind to be happy, despite its elaborate schemes for (mass) delusion. He blames it on three sources of human suffering: “the superior force of nature, the disposition to decay of our bodies, and the

inadequacy of our methods of regulating human relations in the family, the community and the state.” The certainty of death, “I am coming quickly to an end,” intrinsic to the incontestable fact that we are organisms of nature, seems to be the unifying culprit. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 36, 42, 43, 141.

vii I owe the radical critique of the notion of the “safe space,” so popular in many a LGBTQ center or student organization, to Kathryn Bond Stockton. Private conversation.

viii Pablo E. Chacón, “Eric Laurent: ‘El efecto crisis produce una incertidumbre masiva,’” *Clarín*, May 10, 2012, http://www.revistaenie.clarin.com/ideas/Eric-Laurent-psicoanalisis_0_697730446.html. Translation and emphasis are mine.

ix It is worth noting, without rushing to foreclosing conclusions that contaminate all else, that Laurent, and psychoanalysis to a large extent, seem to presuppose a clear opposition of the sexes when he claims, via Lacan, the “impossibility for there to be any norm in the relation between *the sexes*.” My emphasis. Laurent.

x Chacón.

xi *Doing Queer Studies Now* conference plenary. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. October 21, 2010.

xii Annie Le Brun, *Ailleurs et Autrement* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 15. All translations are mine. In that same essay, “De L’Insignifiance En Milieu Vaginal,” Le Brun offers a quote by doll-making artist Hans Bellmer that condenses a lot of Queer Theory’s metaphysical ethos, “(...) a leg isn’t real unless we take it *inevitably* to be a leg.”

xiii Ibid, 10.

xiv Peter Gay, “Sigmund Freud: A Brief Life,” in *Jokes and Their Relation to The Unconscious*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989, xiv.

xv Ibid, xi,xv.

xvi Ibid, xix.

xvii Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1989, p. 52. It’s easy to see the allegorical possibilities of Freud’s manifested bio-speak in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” when he refers to the Subject as “a little fragment of living substance” suspended in an external world charged with powerful energies. “It would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli.” Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. CreateSpace, 2010, p. 41

xviii Pierre Bonny, “Homosexualité et Prises de Risques: Le Sujet Divisé,” *VIH.org*, August 26, 2010, accessed March 4, 2012.

xix Freud, “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,” p. 40. Freud is aware of the nuisance the psychoanalytic represents, for those “who love fairy-tales,” with its universal claims of tendencies toward aggression, destruction and cruelty. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 99.

xx Freud speaks of *inclinations* as well, as a kind of always shifting outcome without finality from what the cultural does to the “constitutional,” and vice versa. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 35.

xxi Freud, “Beyond The Pleasure Principle,” 40.

xxii See Judith Butler, “The Lesbian Phallus and The Morphological Imaginary,” *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press Books, 2011).

xxiii Love’s main goal is to do away with the will to find self-hagiographic salvation when researching the past. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 29.

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