LOST CAUSES

Narrative, Etiology, and Queer Theory

Valerie Rohy

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Introduction

Cause and Effect

From fairest creatures we desire increase.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 1

Can gay men and lesbians grow in numbers? Can they multiply? The question of whether homosexuality could be acquired earned Freud's attention, and the view of dangerous knowledge as potentially transformative fueled the 1928 obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness.* In the United States following World War II, homosexual employees were thought to undermine federal bureaus, as a 1950 U.S. government report asserted, because they "frequently attempt to entice normal individuals to engage in perverted practices."[1] In 1961, a book titled *The Sixth Man: A Startling Investigation of the Spread of Homosexuality in America* claimed to be "inspired by the enigma of the rising homosexuality in our midst."[2] In later decades, of course, the rhetoric of homosexual increase through influence on others endured in other venues: in 1981 Jerry Falwell, the televangelist and star of the *Old Time Gospel Hour,* sent his supporters a letter warning that "homosexuals do not reproduce! They recruit! And, many of them are after my

children and your children."[3] And in 2009, opponents of Annise Parker, a lesbian candidate for mayor of Houston, circulated a letter describing her "Homosexual Agenda," which purportedly instructed homosexuals to "teach homosexuality to school children."[4] Asserting that mere tolerance of homosexuality invites a pedagogy, if not a practice, of "perverted sex acts," the letter cultivated the belief that homosexuality can be acquired, like other bad habits, by exposure to baneful influences.

Then and now, straight culture's fear of queer increase depends on etiology, which is to say, a narrative of causation, a theory of what makes people gay or lesbian. Homophobic etiologies insist that homosexuality results from what I will call *homosexual reproduction*—not literal gay parenting, but the fantasy of proliferation through seduction, influence, recruitment, pedagogy, predation, and contagion.[5] To combat such accusations, lesbian and gay communities have increasingly denounced any account that does not regard homosexuality as immutable and essential; instead, they promote theories of biological determinism, tracing its causality to physiological factors such as genes and hormones. These theories, now so naturalized as to seem, to many, common sense, maintain that we are "born gay."[6] Frederick Whitam, a researcher who supports biological explanations, says that this thesis "relieves the families and homosexuals of guilt. It also means that society doesn't have to worry about things like gay teachers."[7] Biological-determinist theories are regarded as legally beneficial insofar as they support the designation of homosexuality as an immutable trait, and thus identify gay men and lesbians as a suspect class whose legal treatment requires heightened scrutiny.[8] A recent editorial on the legal challenges to California's Proposition 8 claimed that "biology cannot be avoided in determining whether fundamental rights are protected under the equal protection

clause of our Constitution," because theories of causation have profound legal consequences.[9] And anti-gay voices generally concur that "born gay" arguments support tolerance of homosexuality; a book titled *When Homosexuality Hits Home: What to Do When a Loved One Says They're Gay* assails the "common assumption" that "homosexuality is inborn, therefore God made it; therefore it's good."[10]

In the 1990s, scientific attempts to determine the physiological causality of homosexuality coincided with heated debates. Scholars including Vernon Rosario, Edward Stein, and Anne Fausto-Sterling found in studies of biological causation faulty methodologies, unreplicated results, inadequate definitions of homosexuality, poor selection of sample populations, and inaccurate methods of measurement. Queer scholars took biological studies to task for assuming a categorical difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality, denying bisexuality, excluding women, and omitting both historical and cultural differences. Finally, they voiced concerns about the political consequences of a biological etiology and etiology itself.[11] As Robert McRuer observes, "Any myth of origin suggests a linear (or we might say 'straight') path of development and implies a pure and singular starting point"; as such, it underwrites "a naturalized, reproductive model of development."[12] Where homosexuality is concerned, a "pure and singular" answer to the thorny question of origins appeals to those who seek the clarity of identity and identity politics, but it may also serve to naturalize the heteronormative. Further, the medicalization of homosexuality does nothing to change the devaluation of queerness in a heteronormative culture; nor does it deter those who would interpret same-sex desire as a disorder, a pathological condition. Jennifer Terry notes how much this defensive posture concedes: "'Biology makes us act this way. We can't be cured.

We can't seduce your children.' There is little in this approach that particularly affirms the value of resisting heteronormativity."[13] When we focus on what causes homosexuality, we neglect what causes homophobia.

This study, however, takes a different approach. It does not address the scientific question of whether biological factors cause homosexuality, or the legal question of how best to secure equity. Indeed, it assumes that for many readers these matters have been long settled, and not in the direction of "born gay." Instead, this book examines the stories told about gay and lesbian etiology and the language in which they are told. Because the scholarly critique of biological determinism in the 1990s came largely from bioscientists and social scientists, there remains a need for readings of homosexual etiologies as narrative forms, hermeneutic strategies, and constellations of recurring tropes available to the methods of literary studies. Taking as its archive largely canonical fiction and nonfiction by British and American authors from Wilde to the present, this book turns from the present to the past, from the popular to the literary, from the polemical to the speculative, to show how fictional and nonfictional accounts of homosexual etiology afford new ways to frame the relations between causality and queerness.

What is needed is not a better, more accurate, or more sensitive etiology of homosexuality, but a fundamental change in this discourse—a change in and through etiology itself. Given the many difficulties that etiology presents, one might conclude that it should simply be discarded. Yet its effects are far-reaching; we must work through it, for its discourse has shaped understandings of gay and lesbian sexuality for over a century. Jonathan Culler cites Nietzsche's reading of causality as an example of the deconstruction of a naturalized, "tak[en] for granted" formation. Nietzsche shows, in Culler's words, how the "concept of causal

structure is not something given as such but rather the product of a precise tropological or rhetorical operation, a *chronologische Umdrehung* or chronological reversal" performed through metonymy or metalepsis.[14] That is, only after what will become an effect has occurred does one seek, and thereby produce, its cause. In this sense, the deconstruction of causality does not constitute the elimination of causality; instead, "[t]o deconstruct causality one must operate with the notion of cause and apply it to causation itself."[15] The project of this book is to decenter homosexual etiology from gay and lesbian politics by reading causality against itself.[16] After examining the language of etiology in arguments for gay and lesbian equity, this study asks what happens when we acknowledge and even embrace the abject tropes of homosexual reproduction. Informed by that phobic mythology, these chapters comprise a modern bestiary of homosexual causes—bad influence, trauma, "evil reading," contagion, choice, recruitment—examining the penumbra of homophobic history surrounding each, while considering how each may prove itself perversely useful.[17]

As such, *Lost Causes* participates in the movement in queer theory against assimilationist politics and "homonormativity"—that is, as Lisa Duggan puts it, "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising . . . a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption."[18] Because theories of biological determinism and corollaries like "born gay" claim a categorical difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality, they also, ironically, serve efforts of assimilation by allaying fears of queer increase. But a gay activist agenda determined to repudiate whatever makes heterosexuals uneasy is doomed forever to perpetuate those anxieties. Reading homosexual reproduction presents an opportunity to explore ideas that have been deemed politically

unseemly, if not toxic, in gay and lesbian communities. These constitute what David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub call "topics that the imperative of gay pride had tended to place off-limits to legitimate inquiry, or had simply repressed—shameful topics, that is, or topics gay pride itself might make us ashamed to investigate"—topics that, in the eyes of some observers, "seem to vindicate antigay prejudice."[19] That reclamation of formerly shaming terms informs my reading of bad influence in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, chosen identity in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, dangerous knowledge in *The Well of Loneliness*, contagion in *Borrowed Time*, and trauma in *The Night Watch*.

A fundamental point of reference for any study of queer increase is John D'Emilio's pathbreaking 1983 essay, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," which traces the twentieth-century social conditions that allowed some men and women to "become gay." He writes:

> we are *not* a fixed social minority composed for all time of a certain percentage of the population. *There are more of us* than one hundred years ago, more of us than forty years ago. And there may very well be more gay men and lesbians in the future.[20]

D'Emilio's historical assertion, "there are more of us," and prediction, "there may be even more of us," imply a political message as well: *There's nothing wrong with more of us.*[21] My sentiments are the same, but my task is not historical. Thus the more immediate critical contexts of this project come from the work of scholars who, though they may not engage the etiology of homosexuality, address either the actually existing social reproduction of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities and cultures, or the metaphorical and fantasmatic reproduction of homosexuality as such. The former includes Kathryn

R. Kent's work on early twentieth-century feminine culture in *Making Girls into Women*, which examines representations of the "ways lesbians are 'made'"—which is to say, in Kent's words, "queer reproduction."[23] Kent is cautious about what precisely can be replicated: most often it is named "lesbian identity" and its production is identified as fantasmatic. In *How to Be Gay*, David M. Halperin also differentiates between the reproduction of sexuality and that of culture, tracing the "social reproduction of gay male culture."[25] He flirts with scandal, asserting that "gayness can be shared with others and transmitted to them," but he pointedly separates "gayness" from sexuality, insisting that he is "not talking here about what causes either homosexuality or heterosexuality."[24] Homosexual reproduction operates, for him, as the active perpetuation of a subculture through which queer identities and communities are sustained, yet same-sex *desire* remains biologically determined.

A second thread of inquiry contemplates queer increase in more hypothetical terms that do not exclude desire. Guy Hocquenghem borrows a *mot* from Gustav Macé: homosexuals are "people who, though not procreating, have a marked tendency to multiply." Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, he outlines a horizontal, not vertical, web of affiliation: "Homosexual production takes place according to a mode of non-limitative horizontal relations, heterosexual reproduction according to one of hierarchical succession."[25] In the same tradition, E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen have asked "how lineage can become nonlinear or nonfiliative—or might we even become uninvested in lineage as a temporal paradigm in favor of new ways to figure our relation to each other through time"?[26] Tuhkanen imagines "*a process of nonfiliation, a queer breeding*" that eludes the mandate of reproductive futurism.[27] To these we might add recent work by Peter Coviello, who finds in Whitman a queer paternity enabled by metaphorical

surrogacy.[28] Each of these critical works is richly provocative, but among them there is no sustained conversation about queer increase and homosexual reproduction: their forays tend to be isolated and discontinuous. Scholars view homosexual reproduction variously as a phobic myth, as (in some sense) an empirical reality, and as a salutary gay fantasy. For some it is a central concern, but for many it is a peripheral issue; some focus on etiology, while others address queer increase; some are anxious to isolate the social reproduction of gay cultures from the cultivation of gay desires, while others welcome the slippage of that distinction.[29] This project aims to deepen and sustain that critical conversation by approaching the question of homosexual reproduction through theories of causality derived from psychoanalysis and literature, which index the complexity *within* notions of homosexual reproduction and extend beyond conventional cause and effect to discover retroactive, absent, contingent, and impossible causalities. That task draws on recent queer studies of temporality, including work by Caroline Dinshaw, Elizabeth Freeman, and Judith Halberstam, which complicate the seemingly obvious, but frequently unreliable, logic of before-and-after that subtends conventional causality.[30]

Instances of extraordinary causality serve as a reminder of the queer difference within what can perhaps too easily seem the reproduction of homosexual sameness—that is, the replication of gay and lesbian cultures and identities. Where previous discussions largely address the proliferation of gay identities and cultures in a positive sense (that is, as coherent entities, even when socially judged less than desirable), I am equally concerned with queer negativity, difference, and nonmeaning. I therefore use the adjectives "homosexual," "gay and lesbian" and "queer" more or less interchangeably, but I distinguish between "homosexuality" and "queerness." (I choose "homosexual reproduction," not "gay

and lesbian reproduction," precisely *because* the retrograde implications of "homosexual" befit the formerly shaming tropes of causation examined here.[31] While the reproduction of gay and lesbian cultures and identities constitutes a reproduction of sameness, the reproduction of queerness means the proliferation of difference: not only the difference that Derrida associates with writing and that indicated by the Real in Lacan's model of the Symbolic order, but also the difference that Lee Edelman describes as queer negativity. Edelman writes, "queerness cannot be severed from its structuring negativity and that every effort to give it a literal referent, a determinate content, reflects our investment as social subjects in eliminating what's queer."[32] If homosexuality can be assimilated to heteronormative culture, as with the inclusion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the military and, increasingly, the institution of marriage, queerness is by definition unassimilable, resistant not only to hegemony—identity, law, the Symbolic order, narrative closure—but also to the fixity of its own meaning. And in the effort to think about causation in queerer terms, psychoanalysis and literature, the realms of the analyst and the detective, offer hermeneutic methods attuned to negativity, indeterminacy, and impossibility.

ANALYST AND DETECTIVE

> There can be no misunderstanding that is not based on a fundamental relation to truth.
>
> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*

Despite the noxious purposes that figures of corrupting friends, recruiting teachers, and other predatory queers are made to serve,

even the most derogatory notions of homosexual reproduction are not simply mistaken: they convey something that queer observers may not yet acknowledge about the workings of desire and culture. In examining such tropes, the wager of this book is that literature and psychoanalysis are not merely the sources of certain etiological narratives—notably, the detective plot and the case study—but also effective tools for thinking about etiology as a form and homosexual etiologies in particular. In literature, etiology constitutes a specific narrative form, while causality supplies an underlying principle of narrative as such. Aristotle defines narrative as a causally related series of occurrences, and E. M. Forster explains that a plot is "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality."[33] Clearly genres such as the detective plot foreground causation, but even narratives that appear unconcerned with it presuppose causal connections among events. There can be no functional narrative without the presumption of causality, which upholds effects of realism and coherence.[34] As Roland Barthes writes, "Although in narrative they are never pure, temporality and causality seem to us to found a sort of naturality, intelligibility, readability."[35] When causal relations are not specified, we infer them; they still seem tacitly at work. As a narrative form, etiology informs any origin myth—any story, we might say, of "how the leopard got his spots."[36] But it finds its greatest purpose in matters of deviance and sin, illness and disorder, exemplified in the first question of *Paradise Lost*: "what cause / Mov'd our Grand Parents . . . to fall off / From their Creator, and transgress his Will"?[37] Stephen Kern regards the nineteenth-century murder novel, with its "clear and strongly deterministic causal factors," as the epitome of conventional narrative causality.[38] With this proclivity for the non-normative, no etiology can wholly avoid the connotation of pathology, even when it shares the narrative geometry of general causality.[39]

That is certainly true in psychoanalytic theory, where the case study attempts to identify the origins of an individual's suffering. In an early essay, Freud designates factors that have "an unambiguous and specific relation to the aetiology of the individual major neuroses."[40] Psychoanalytic case studies share literary structures, and the chain of analogies linking doctor, analyst, reader, and detective is well known. Philip Rieff famously calls Freud a "master of detection" comparable to Sherlock Holmes.[41] For Freud the goal of the analyst is that of the detective: to produce a narrative of the past that identifies the cause of a present disorder, whether psychic or social. Calling Freud "as much a novelist as he is an analyst," Steven Marcus suggests that patients come to Freud with fragmentary narratives; indeed, "illness amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself."[42] Judith Roof concurs: "Narrative defines the parameters of analysis, setting an imagined whole story against the patient's partial one."[43] Other scientific etiologies—from Darwin to today's biological determinism—also formally engage with literary traditions, offering narratives in which the past causes something in the present. But literature and psychoanalysis are also technologies for unmaking narratives. Both reserve a central place for indeterminacy and overdetermination and both have the potential to denaturalize "common sense" about such issues as sexuality, agency, signification, and identity.

How then might literature and psychoanalysis intervene in queer etiologies? To outline how their premises might be developed, I want briefly to sketch some recurring threads of the following chapters' arguments and answer some implicit questions about the presuppositions of this project with reference to literary texts and Freud's case study, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman."

1. *The question of homosexual etiology is, in the strongest sense of the term, undecidable.* In *The Charioteer,* Mary Renault compares young soldier Laurie's homosexuality to his friend Andrew's status as a British conscientious objector during World War II. Andrew is an anomaly in "one of those army families where every second or third generation throws off a sport, a musician perhaps, or a brilliant agricultural crank."[44] He is a "sport," a mutation, because he resists war, but that difference signifies sexually as well: Havelock Ellis named homosexuality "a 'sport,' or variation, one of those organic aberrations which we see throughout living nature."[45] And in Andrew's account, conscientious objectors, like gay men, are seen as an evolutionary dead end: "Subconsciously they feel we're a biological loss and ought not to have women or propagate ourselves."[46] But if they are not encouraged to reproduce sexually, pacifists are believed to proliferate asexually through the transmission of dangerous ideas. Another soldier warns Laurie against intimacy with Andrew, asking, "That kid that does the ward at night, the young one, properly took to you, hasn't he?" Laurie is noncommittal, but Reg continues: "What I'm getting at, Spud, you want to watch it. No offense." When Laurie persists in his incomprehension, Reg must be more explicit: "I mean the law.... Because that's an offense. Seducing His Majesty's troops from their allegiance."[47] Ironically, Andrew is not attempting to seduce Laurie into treason, but Laurie is rather actively trying to seduce Andrew into homosexuality—or at any rate, into a relationship with him.

Much like pacifism in *The Charioteer,* homosexuality has been explained *both* as an innate quality, a "sport" of nature, and as an acquired corruption, the result of seduction, even by such august observers as Freud. Kern notes that late Victorian accounts of homosexuality conjured multiple causes: "many experts believed that one could be born to homosexuality, be seduced into it, *and*

catch it like some disease."[48] Freud, as we know, departs from Victorian sexology, but he too finds the etiology of homosexuality paradoxical. In "Psychogenesis," whose title plainly announces its concern with origins, his question is much like today's: Is homosexuality innate or acquired? His ambivalent answer shows how complicated that question must be. Freud cites numerous postnatal causes of the young woman's homosexuality, including a revival of her Oedipal complex at puberty and her disappointment when her mother, not herself, bore her father's child. While he feels that he has proven the acquired status of her condition, he admits some discomfort:

> a part even of this acquired disposition (if it *was* really acquired) has to be ascribed to inborn constitution. So we see in practice a continual mingling and blending of what in theory we should try to separate into a pair of opposites—namely, inherited and acquired characters.[49]

The structure of this "pair of opposites" repeats throughout the essay's prolonged traversal of opposing claims. Having asserted that homosexuality is, in this case, both inherited and acquired, he turns again, concluding that it is "congenital" and *not* "late-acquired" homosexuality.[50] Beyond these answers, however, Freud is divided on the question itself: "whether this was a case of congenital or acquired homosexuality, will be answered by the whole history of the patient's abnormality and its development. The study of this will show how far this question is a fruitless and inapposite one."[51] The task is "fruitless," yet it must be engaged; the question can and cannot be answered; the project is and is not intrinsically valid. Each "pair of opposites" leads further from the polarized certainties of our time, with a "both/and" logic that contradicts

the "either/or" on which both sexual difference and object choice are supposed to rely. What is most critical in "Psychogenesis" is not any single assertion but the sum of them all: Freud's mixture of buoyant confidence and radical doubt amid the uncertainty of the essay's warring conclusions.

The methodological problems haunting extant biological-determinist studies suggest that, like Freud, we should be at least agnostic on the question of causality, rather than embracing theories such as the "gay gene"—and that is to a large degree my attitude here. This book does not attempt to answer the question of causation: its project is not ontological, for its subject is the representation of queerness and queer increase. But I would go further than suspending judgment. Science will never find the biological cause of homosexuality, not because there is no biological cause but because there is no homosexuality: what that term names is too heterogeneous to totalize. To borrow from Judith Butler, "the 'being' of being homosexual" must remain in question, for "homosexuality" is a collocation of terms, each with its own relation to biology, contingency, culture, volition, and mutability.[52] It can describe unconscious same-sex desire, consciously acknowledged desire, sexual acts, affective bonding, a private identity, a public identity, (sometimes) gender nonconformity, (various) ethical commitments and political leanings, morphological self-fashioning, and/or myriad forms of engagement with queer subcultures. *Pace* "born gay," some of these dimensions are patently mutable. Changing sexuality is, after all, precisely the intention of National Coming Out Day, which attempts to influence people to "be" gay, where that *being* signifies a public, politicized identity. In 2013, the Human Rights Campaign produced a National Coming Out Day video whose message included the curious statement: "This is who I am / I need to finally be who I am."[53] "Who I am" is,

presumably, a man who loves men or a woman who loves women, but one can occupy this identity without "being" it, for to "be" gay is, in this context, to be out and visible.

2. *The alignment of innate/acquired with minoritizing/universalizing, nature/culture, and pro-gay/anti-gay is itself unstable.* One need not accept all of Freud's assertions on homosexual etiology to grasp how psychoanalysis unravels seemingly obvious ideas about the origins of desire. Psychoanalytic theory offers compelling reasons to see same-sex desire as innate that have nothing to do with biological determinism and do not exclude the possibility that homosexuality is also acquired. "Born gay" and "gay gene" rhetoric assumes that homosexuality may be deemed *either* innate, natural, and biological (ostensibly a pro-gay stance), *or* acquired, learned, and socially constructed (regarded as a homophobic view). Correspondingly, biological-determinist theories defend what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms a minoritizing model of sexuality, in which "there is a distinct population of people who 'really are' gay," rather than the universalizing model in which "sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities."[54] Although for Sedgwick neither position has an inherent political valence—they operate simultaneously to maintain heteronormative structures—both pro-gay and anti-gay arguments now presume that the minoritizing notion of natal homosexuality serves gay interests.

In "Psychogenesis," as we have seen, Freud entertains the possibility that homosexuality can be both innate and acquired, troubling the polarized terms of today's etiologies. How can this be? In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* he considers but rejects the theory of congenital inversion: homosexuals' difference cannot be innate because "it is possible to show that very early in their lives a sexual impression occurred which left a permanent after-effect

in the shape of a tendency to homosexuality."[55] One must always *become* homosexual—or heterosexual—out of a long and necessarily incomplete negotiation with sociality, leaving behind a polymorphous perversity. While the capacity for same-sex desire is innate, that desire does not constitute homosexuality, but rather one aspect of an undifferentiated libido; there can be no natal homosexuality because *both* homo- and heterosexuality depend on "a restriction in the choice of object."[56] Both homosexuality and heterosexuality require the recognition of sexual difference to set in motion the narrowing of infantile perversity into more or less acceptable channels.

So although Freud's notion that same-sex desire is natural and innate shares crucial premises with today's "born gay," it produces precisely the opposite conclusion, for it does not serve the effort to delineate a separate homosexual population. In his case against the biological imperative, Martin Duberman evokes Sedgwick's minoritizing model: "Most heterosexuals are delighted with the suggestion that homosexuality is inborn. It then becomes a trait confined to a small number of people who are distinctly Other, wholly unrelated to oneself."[57] Freud, however, proffers a universalizing theory of innate same-sex desire: "all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious."[58] His theory of what causes homosexuality is thus a backward version of "born this way" that fractures the alignment of innate/acquired with minoritizing/universalizing. Although extending queer potential to "all human beings" evacuates the function of innate homosexuality as the basis for juridical protection from bias, Freud's universalizing theory is also politically progressive, as Henry Abelove contends, since "the corollary of the humane ascription of minority status was this: that people outside the minority need no longer think

of themselves as in some important way homosexual too."[59] The Freudian view allows same-sex desire to remain, in Sedgwick's words, "an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities."[60] One might compare this universalizing theory of innate same-sex desire to that of Adrienne Rich in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," which also rejects the oppositions that structure today's etiological discourse. Instead of making innate homosexuality and voluntary homosexuality antithetical, Rich suggests that only by *choosing* lesbianism can women restore the organic female orientation from which they have been culturally alienated.

3. *Etiological projects are structured by multiple forms of retroaction.* As Culler notes, the putative sequencing of cause-before-effect is subject to critical reversal: "If the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should be treated as the origin."[62] The same complication of temporality can be observed in the etiological narratives of literature and psychoanalysis as they examine past events to determine the cause of some present disorder. In psychoanalysis, that disorder is typically neurosis, while in literature it tends to be crime; both constitute a traumatic break in ordinary temporality. James M. Bromley explains that "[e]tiologies, by definition, cast a retrospective meaning on previous events; as such, they structurally resemble traditional narratives in terms of closure."[63] In each case, closure requires the orderly narration of causes and effects that have been obscured or disrupted. Writing on the detective novel, Slavoj Žižek calls the crime "an event that cannot be integrated into symbolic reality because it appears to interrupt the 'normal' causal chain," turning events into a "lawless sequence" that the detective must correct by renarrating the series of events in proper order.[64] Barthes makes

a similar point, noting an effect of "postponed causality": "detective work consists in filling in, backwards, the fascinating and unendurable interval separating the event from its cause; the detective, emanation of the entire society in its bureaucratic form, then becomes the modern figure of the ancient solver of riddles (Oedipus), who puts an end to the terrible *why* of things."[65] Both indicate that somehow the inaugural moment of the plot produces a disturbance in causality and temporality, but Žižek attributes that disturbance to the crime and Barthes locates it in the crime's solution. Both are correct: the etiological project of the detective narrative can reestablish "the 'normal' causal chain" only through abnormal methods, through the retroactive construction of events. Distorted temporality is a symptom of the problem, but it is also the very mechanism of the solution.

In psychoanalysis as well, the etiological project works through temporal disorder to amend temporal disorder. Freud believes that a case study such as "Psychogenesis" should delineate causal relations that function definitively backward or forward, yet the young woman's story presents a "a disturbing state of affairs" regarding "aetiological factors that decide a given result": he can only narrate it backward and cannot predict the eventual effects from what he has identified as the causal factors. Freud attributes this failure to the multiple factors at work in the case, but the real problem is the form of etiological narrative: "the chain of causation can always be recognized with certainty if we follow the line of analysis, whereas to predict it along the line of synthesis is impossible."[66] With its other notable paradoxes, the case yokes together certainty and impossibility to describe the function of retroactive causality in the psychoanalytic method: Freud proceeds backward into the past in order to track, among other things, the operations of *Nachträglichkeit*. As Malcolm Bowie puts it, "mental causality

seemed to have one peculiarity that set it apart from the rest of nature: in the mind, the present could alter the past."[67]

Perhaps this is why there is also something atemporal, unnatural, and uncertain about causal relations. Lacan argues that causality as such is disturbed causality: "Whenever we speak of cause, on the other hand, there is always something anti-conceptual, something indefinite. . . . In short, there is cause only in something that doesn't work."[68] And Barthes, from a rather different perspective, concurs. The same texts that foreground the restoration of causal order are also "constituted by the disturbance of causality, as if the spectacle ('notability,' one should say) began where causality, without ceasing to be affirmed, already contained a germ of deterioration, as if causality could be consummated only when it began to rot, to disintegrate."[69] In such texts, literature joins psychoanalysis in addressing the contingency and artificiality of what pass for etiological conclusions, whether in the detective story or the case study: both exercises in logic are inextricable from logical fallacies such as *post hoc propter hoc*. Conventional etiologies produce merely the illusion of coherent meaning out of chaos.

4. *Sexuality itself is subject to multiple forms of retroaction.* Homosexual etiologies are no exception to the paradoxical structure of etiological narrative, but their particular causes and effects inevitably engage with the temporal ordering of heteronormative society.[70] That is why retroactivity and unsequencing in narratives of queer causality function so intricately *with* and *against* the backwardness of etiological narrative as such. As Kathryn Bond Stockton shows, among the many forms of retroactive construction to which the queer child is subject, the later invention of an early homosexuality is crucial.[71] But this retroactivity extends beyond the queer child to his straight brother: it is not that all children are born straight, but that their organic straightness has

been invented after the fact by the same discourse in which "afterwardness," the *après coup*, comes to signify perversion. That process goes unremarked because the surveillant property of homosexual etiology reinforces the deviant status of its object, as opposed to the unquestioned privilege of heterosexuality. As Paul Morrison observes, when "the pervert comes to occupy center stage," white male heteronormativity remains "the cause that need never speak its name," protected by its veil of normalcy.[2] When in *Dorian Gray* Sibyl Vane falls in love with Dorian, her love causes effects—it makes her "altered" and unlovable—but there is no question of *its* cause.[3] In their efforts to naturalize homosexuality, proponents of biological determinism have no interest in showing the unnaturalness of heterosexuality, the ways in which it must itself be taught, learned, communicated—in short, culturally reproduced. They merely ask that homosexuality be accorded the same "privilege of unknowing."[4]

One of the most pernicious effects of "born gay," then, is its implicit corollary, "born straight," which obscures all the ways in which heteronormative culture works systematically to interpellate individuals to their proper roles through influences, incentives, and threats. Those who, like the opponents of Annise Parker, assert that queers "recruit children to their lifestyle," do not merely assert the artificiality of homosexuality but also, implicitly, the naturalness of heterosexuality. In fact, it is heterosexuals who recruit. Every child is assumed to be straight at birth, yet every child is also taught to be straight by family, school, media, and peers. In *The Well of Loneliness*, Stephen enjoys her father's fond tolerance, but her mother subjects her to the "soft dresses and sashes, and ribbons, and small coral beads, and openwork stockings" that she hates. A playmate, "already full of feminine poses," says "'Can't you knit?' . . . looking scornfully at Stephen, 'I can—Mother called

me a dear little housewife.'" Neighbors invite her to dinner parties that are "insistent upon sex distinction," including, as they approach the dining room, a "solemn and very ridiculous procession, animals marching into Noah's Ark two by two." Finally, of course, her mother banishes her from home after her failure to recruit Stephen as a heterosexual.[75] The violence with which the Right denounces "born gay" owes much to this dynamic: it is the effort to conceal the unnatural form of *heterosexual* reproduction that impels the association of homosexuality with unnatural (discursive or memetic) proliferation and heterosexuality with natural (sexual or genetic) increase. From the mythology of the institution to the *habitus* of the individual, the specter of queers' unnatural reproduction secures heterosexuality's claim to naturalness; the essential falsehood is not that homosexuality is artificially and retroactively reproduced, but that heterosexuality *is not*. In the chapters that follow, such questions of retroaction, sexuality, etiology, and narrative form take shape in the belated formation of lesbian identity through the act of reading, the ways in which queerness "returns from the future" to a text, the backward invention of gay ancestors, the peculiar temporality of the coming-out narrative, the impossible choice of sexual and racial identities, and the insistence of non-chronological narrative forms, as well as Lacan's notion of a cause produced, impossibly, by its own effects.

Conclusion

Multiply and Divide

The Lesbian Avengers, an activist group formed in the 1990s, responded to phobic narratives of homosexual reproduction with a slogan, "We Recruit," and a chant: "Ten percent is not enough: recruit, recruit, recruit!" Echoing Harvey Milk's famous line about recruiting voters, "We Recruit" is a parody of anti-gay paranoia, even if observers on the Right, apparently deficient in irony, have quoted it widely as evidence of the speakers' real intentions.[1] Functioning not descriptively but performatively, "We Recruit" resembles another "untrue" statement, the second-wave feminist axiom, "we are all lesbians."[2] The latter is not a statement of fact, nor is it merely a proclamation of solidarity with a vulnerable group; it is a verbal inoculation against a particular malady—that is, the effort to shame heterosexual feminists by calling them lesbians. "We Recruit" functions as a similar remedy, for embracing the mythology of acquired homosexuality is the only way not to be terrorized by it—the only way to avoid the contortions of disavowal. A similar gesture informs Lee Edelman's *No Future*. Discussing the figural burden forced on the queer in a culture of reproductive futurism—the burden of representing all that obviates the future—he takes a contrarian view: "Rather than rejecting,

with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it."[3] And where homosexual reproduction is concerned, claiming an abject identity, even if that claiming is a rhetorical gesture, is an act of resistance to mortifying accusations.

Instead of pitting biological determinism against anti-gay notions of homosexual reproduction, that is, we would do better to accept the unnatural proliferation with which queer people are charged. We should own the mythology of homosexual reproduction, because imagining a world in which *more* homosexuals are welcome is essential to producing a world in which *any* homosexuals are welcome. Equity does not require more queer people, but it requires a culture in which the idea of more queer people is not regarded as disastrous. Referring to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1991 essay "How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay," Michael Warner argues that tolerance is not sufficient: "heteronormativity can be overcome only by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world," although at the time of his writing, in 1993, "the idea that the emergence of more queers might be a desirable outcome remains unthinkable."[4] Today that idea is thinkable, and to pursue it means abandoning a minoritizing narrative in which same-sex desire is so feeble and "self-limiting" that there is "no scenario in which [it] spreads throughout a population."[5]

One version of the Lesbian Avengers' counterintuitive claim may emerge from the vexed question of choice. As the previous chapter suggested, many observers, both pro-gay and anti-gay, believe that the claim that gay and lesbian identities can be chosen devalues these identities.[6] The assertion that homosexuality is the product of individual volition, they say, implies that it can be undone in the same way: queers could, and should, choose to be otherwise. That is why Eric Marcus answers the question posed by his

book's title, *Is It A Choice?* by asserting that we "don't get a choice about our feelings of sexual attraction."[7] The concept of choice has become so inextricable from homophobia that many gay and lesbian people treat choice as *essentially* noxious. In 2000, at the final debate of the U.S. presidential campaign, then-President George Bush and Senator John Kerry paused to consider an issue distant from the usual matters of public policy. Moderator Bob Scheiffer asked, "Both of you are opposed to gay marriage. But to understand how you have come to that conclusion, I want to ask you a more basic question. Do you believe homosexuality is a choice?" What may have seemed a philosophical question had obvious political implications: while Kerry's assertion that "it's not a choice" signaled his support for gay rights, Bush's "I don't know" needed only to refuse that narrative to align him with the competing story in which homosexuality represents a sinful "lifestyle."[8] The same suppositions were evident in the chorus of denunciation that greeted presidential candidate Bill Richardson in August 2007, when he said that he believed homosexuality was "a choice," although his next remarks affirmed his support for gay rights.[9]

So abhorrent is the notion of choosing to be gay or lesbian that when actor Cynthia Nixon came out in 2012, her remarks were met with outrage in LGBT communities. As Nixon tells it:

> I gave a speech recently, an empowerment speech to a gay audience, and it included the line "I've been straight and I've been gay, and gay is better." And they tried to get me to change it, because they said it implies that homosexuality can be a choice. And for me, it is a choice.[10]

It makes no difference that she identified as gay, embraced queer culture, and did not pretend to speak for anyone other than

herself: choice is always anathema.[11] Why would anyone choose to be gay? A website created by an apparently well-meaning straight couple to support their gay son answered that question with a chart listing eleven "positives" and "negatives" of homosexuality. The "negatives" range from violent death to eternal damnation; the "positives," repeated eleven times, are "none."[12] The message is clear: no rational person would choose to be gay because being gay is an unmitigated calamity. But to assert that no one would ever choose a gay or lesbian life is to assert that homosexuality is *intrinsically* a hardship to be borne by hapless victims; that is the unmistakable message when those who note the "negatives" of homosexuality do not recognize their exteriority, their historicity, their contingency. In their haste to combat anti-gay polemics, proponents of "born gay" have created a discourse whose cringing attitude ("We can't help it! No one would choose such an fate!") categorically rejects the possibility that same-sex desire could be wanted.[13]

What would it mean, then, to say that "we choose"? As we have seen, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is structured by the narrator's "impossible" ability to define his own racial and sexual identities. Johnson's novel makes the seemingly absurd proposition that a man may choose his race and sexuality. At the end of the text the nameless narrator takes a wife as deliberately as he becomes a white man, putting behind him other affiliations and modes of desire, even if he half-regrets that turn: "I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part."[14] While such conscious self-making is by no means commonplace in gay and lesbian communities, there is a long pro-choice tradition in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer thought. In 1980, Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" revealed heterosexual "preference" as radically less organic and volitional than it appeared,

and lesbianism as *more* so. Some lesbian feminists have been asserting their choice of sexual identities and partners for decades; whereas today the idea that homosexuality might be chosen is met with outrage, Rich's references to "women who have chosen women" and "the act of choosing a woman lover" were then among her *least* contentious claims.[15] For his part, John D'Emilio suspects that the rush to embrace biological determinism is motivated by the fear that "if we did have a choice, we might choose otherwise." But, he concludes, "I would also like to know that we might embrace our sexual identity even if we discovered we had a choice."[16] More recently, Donna Minkowitz acknowledges that there are "grains of truth" in right-wing charges about acquired homosexuality: "Maybe you didn't choose to be gay—that's fine. But I did."[17]

Of course, we cannot really choose to be gay—not because sexuality is biologically determined and not because being gay is a catastrophe. Instead, as we have seen in *The Night Watch*, contingency plays a signal role; and as psychoanalytic theory and myriad strands of post-structuralist thought remind us, we are not free subjects, but subject *to* the anarchic unconscious and the ideological constraints of our time and place. There is no agency where the disposition of the libido is concerned. We cannot choose our desires; indeed, we cannot even truly know them. Yet we must *both* acknowledge the impossibility of this choice *and* demand our notional right to choose queerness, for a culture in which homosexuality cannot be chosen is surely a culture of coercion. In the biological-determinist argument, freedom depends on straight culture's belief that there is no voluntary homosexuality. When Marcus assures his reader that her sexuality is "innate, immutable, and uniquely your own," he affirms the sovereign liberal subject by negating that subject's agency to shape her or his own desire.[18] Here, paradoxically, freedom is found in compulsion; the tolerance

of homosexuals we are told, depends on their inability to choose homosexuality. We are free to live as gay *only as long as we do not want to live as gay*. In a world governed by that Kafkaesque proposition, insisting on the right to choose the impossible starts to look eminently reasonable. It is worth imagining a world in we recruit, we choose, we increase: all three may be untenable, but the gesture of affirming the impossible may yet be vitally important.

The impossibility of that claiming opens onto the dimension of difference and negativity inherent in all narratives of identity and community, their difference-from-themselves. That negativity crucially complicates any engagement with the tropes of homosexual reproduction; it is all that prevents "we recruit" or "we choose" from becoming merely another etiological narrative, for as Annamarie Jagose writes, "queer is less an identity than a *critique* of identity."[19] Queerness resembles evolutionary mutation and variation as an insistence of pure difference; in literature, as we have seen, it takes the form of an absent cause in *Dorian Gray*, an abyssal deferral of meaning in *The Well of Loneliness*, contingency in *The Night Watch*, anti-futurism in *Borrowed Time*, and the instability of identity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Queerness tempers the rigidity of identity and identity politics with endless variation, eternal difference. The stakes are clear: for Edelman, theories of difference always confront the "danger of regressing from difference to presence, from relations without any positive terms to relations among differences or identities that tempt us to know them 'in themselves.'"[20] This is the problem with understanding homosexual reproduction merely as gay culture begetting gay culture, for that generates what Sedgwick calls "separatist assimilation"—the separatist difference from the norm becomes meaningless when the scission of that difference is reduced to the sameness of an identity category. Biological etiologies

promote a fantasy of assimilation and liberal inclusion by representing homosexuals as *fundamentally distinct from* heterosexuals, as Sedgwick observes. The identity-based social movements on which gay and lesbian activism models itself, she writes, "claim the right of seamless social assimilation for a group of people on the basis of a separatist understanding of them as embodying a stable ontological difference."[21] At once separatist and assimilationist, "born gay" produces a curious narrative of categorical difference from heterosexuality and subsumption by it. By contrast, the difference instantiated by queerness cannot serve the separatist mode of "ethnic model" gay politics.

What then would it mean to imagine the reproduction of queerness, difference, contingency, negativity? What I have been calling "homosexual reproduction" encompasses both the social reproduction of really existing, material gay and lesbian cultures and identities and, antithetically, the reproduction of "lost," retroactive, and contingent causes. The former is a homosexual reproduction of sameness; the latter is a queer reproduction of difference. Homosexuality and queerness necessarily have different relations to causality: gay and lesbian identities and cultures reproduce or "cause" themselves, but queerness is reproduced or "caused" by its abjection from heteronormative culture.[22] Gay and lesbian identities and institutions perpetuate themselves over time—for example, in the social reproduction of gay male culture that David M. Halperin describes in *How To Be Gay*—while queerness troubles the security of identities and institutions. Homosexuality multiplies, so to speak, but queerness divides. If literary texts often chronicle and sustain the dissemination of gay and lesbian identities and cultures, they also engage with the queer impulse whose reproduction means more difference, not more of the same. Both operate in and around *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through different

retroactive mechanisms: Wilde's homosexuality "returns from the future" when twentieth-century gay male culture invents itself through identification with him, but something more like queerness takes the place of the Lacanian Real as an absent cause that nonetheless produces effects.

Just what queer reproduction will engender must remain forever in doubt; it is a solicitation of the inherent perversity in everyone and everything.[23] We can't know in advance, as Sedgwick would say, what the parameters of this queerness will be—only that it will exceed our understanding of intimacy, enjoyment, identification, politics, and community. The reproduction of queerness will be negative, not positive; its multiplication *as such* will constitute division. Describing difference as a negative space that does not need to be occupied or made intelligible, Jacques Khalip pointedly compares it to queerness: "difference, like 'negativity' in *No Future*, does not require fulfillment; it resists the motions of consensus, sociality, and agreement that would want us to think of theory as having always to pay tribute at the altars of sociality."[24] This is what is lost if "born gay" goes unquestioned or is replaced by some other politically expedient meme, some other convenient story about the etiology of homosexuality. And it is why the social reproduction of gay male, bisexual, and lesbian cultures must be accompanied by the propagation of queerness as an ongoing negotiation with difference.