

TEACHERS TALK

QUEER FEELINGS/FEELING QUEER

A Conversation with Heather Love about Politics, Teaching, and the "Dark, Tender Thrills" of Affect

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Thinking about feelings has long been a central concern for Queer Theory. From the early days of Gay Liberation, queer and gender non-conforming people recognized that eradicating homophobia in others could begin only when we examined our own fears, desires, and hopes. "Gay is Good" did both political and affective work: it functioned both as a challenge to the heteronormative world and like its counterpart in the Black Power movement, "Black is Beautiful," as a project of self-empowerment and self-love.

Over time "gay pride" became the predominant mechanism for political organizing and cultural analysis within LGBT communities. In the 1980s, the symbol for the LGBT rights movement was the pink triangle, the pathologizing, genocidal sign of Nazi concentration camps reclaimed as a message of survival and resistance. It's no coincidence that Gran Fury, the arts collective that emerged alongside ACT UP in response to the carnage of the AIDS crisis, adopted the pink triangle in their "Silence=Death" campaign. In the words of Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, the integration of the pink triangle into the design declared that "silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival" (14).

More recently, however, the rainbow flag has supplanted the pink triangle. There are good reasons for this: the pink triangle as a symbol refers only to gay men, rather than the extended and multifaceted movement of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and other sexual minorities who are now at least provisionally embraced in the acronym LGBT. The rainbow flag, created by San Francisco artist Gilbert Baker in 1978, took a little while to penetrate beyond the West Coast of the United States, but has now been adopted internationally. But the falling away of the pink triangle, especially after the appropriation of the symbol by AIDS activism, to me suggests a shift in focus, from a historical recognition of the pain and trauma of the past and a desire to transform silence, in Audre Lorde's words, into language and action to a presentist celebration of gay pride and achievement. The rainbow flag, for all its inclusiveness, is broad but not deep. Its values, linked to each color, are (according to a variety of websites that trace its history) life, healing, sunlight, nature, magic/art, serenity/harmony, and spirit.¹ While these concepts are at the very least pleasant and can be valuable, they erase the friction and difficulties of actual queer lives, the weight

¹ It's worth noting that the original flag designed and hand-sewn by Gilbert Baker had eight stripes: the topmost stripe was hot pink and symbolized sexuality. Once the flag went into mass production, the hot pink stripe was dropped, since the manufacturer did not have pink fabric in stock. While one shouldn't read too much into what seems to be an accident of history and flag-producer fabric availability, it's at the very least a telling coincidence that the value that is most difficult to contain and least harmonious—sexual desire—is the one that did not make it onto the version of the flag that has come down to us through history.

of history, the realities of homophobic pushback and our own ambivalence about our desires, indeed about desire at all.

Beyond the political critiques of what Lisa Duggan has called “homonormativity”—“politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179)—queer theorists have of late turned to our less attractive feelings and our more uncomfortable impulses as sources of understanding about the past, conflict, trauma, and desire. Ann Cvetkovich’s groundbreaking *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) explored the role of trauma in everyday lesbian lives, and how surviving pain was often a crucial part of lesbian self-making. More recently, a shelf-full of books has appeared that challenges the narrative of relentless political and psychological progress for LGBT people, books that acknowledge and value the much more complex experiences of setbacks, backlash, self-criticism, and sadness that are laminated in with the more public affects of pride, triumph, and success.²

In this context, Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007) makes a crucial contribution. This deeply moving study takes as its starting point the “central paradox of any transformative criticism... [that] its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence” (1). And, as Love points out, the successes of LGBT organizing, rather than opening up space to talk about this history, has foreclosed any such conversation: “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” (4). It’s not surprising that queers have tried to put those feelings behind us; as Love points out, “given the scene of destruction at our backs, queers feel compelled to keep moving on toward a brighter future” (162). At the same time, Love sees in the ambivalence and resistance of (proto-) modernist figures like Walter Pater, Willa Cather, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Radclyffe Hall models of queerness that do not preclude liberation but complicate it with what she calls “backwardness: shyness, ambivalence, failure, melancholia, loneliness, regression, victimhood, heartbreak, antimodernism, immaturity, self-hatred, despair, shame” (146).

I had the opportunity to sit down with Heather Love in November, 2011, and to follow up with an email exchange in January 2012; these are excerpts from our conversations.

SARAH E. CHINN: How do you think theories of affect are particularly useful for thinking about queer and gender nonconforming lives? What does affect theory give us that other kinds of theory, queer and otherwise, can’t offer?

HEATHER LOVE: I think fine-grained accounts of affect are really important for addressing a whole host of non-normative and minoritarian experiences, queer, trans, and otherwise. There are a lot of precedents

2 To name just a few: Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*; Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*; Lee Edelman, *No Future*; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. That’s not to say that all recent work on queer affect has tended towards the negative. Most notably, José Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* looks to the queer past, especially the world of visual art, to formulate the promise of a non-homonormative political future.

for contemporary affect theory in feminism, postcolonial studies, ethnic studies, and Marxism, which I think makes sense — because if you are trying to understand and address situations of injustice, it's important to be able to describe the ways that everyday experience is structured by inequality. At its best, I think affect studies can work in concert with other kinds of analyses—legal, political, economic, linguistic, etc. But without attention to affect I think it's a real struggle to articulate and explain the way that oppression registers at small scales—in everyday interactions, in gesture, tone of voice, etc. And when you try to account for this kind of saturation of the social world by homophobia, or racism, you can be written off as paranoid or touchy. Scholars in affect studies have tried to address this problem by developing rigorous and specific accounts of what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling.”

SEC: Do you see an opposition between the political underpinnings of queer theory and the agenda of affect studies? And how does this connect to queer studies' long investment in psychoanalytic models?

HL: The study of affect is so central to queer studies right now that I am not sure it makes sense to oppose the two fields. I do think one way that affect studies has changed queer theory is by shifting away from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic models of the subject that prevailed around the time it was founded. A lot of people working on affect in queer studies — myself included — were trained in psychoanalytic theory, but have shifted toward more descriptive and less structural accounts of subjectivity. It's interesting to note the importance of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's turn toward affect in her later work as a model for a lot of us in the field: looking back on her own progression from *Between Men* and *Epistemology of the Closet* to *Touching Feeling* and work on Melanie Klein, Sedgwick notes this kind of shift in her own work. For me it's been very productive to engage with some new vocabularies and frameworks that allow for looser, more descriptive accounts of psychic and corporeal experience.

SEC: In your book you're especially interested in difficult, inconvenient, or angry feelings. Can you talk a bit about why this way of thinking about queer feeling appeals to you? What does our commitment to political movements organized around pride and integration leave out?

HL: When I wrote *Feeling Backward*, I was trying to address what seemed to me a gap in academic accounts of queer experience and queer aesthetics. Although I had taken a lot of personal strength from the politics of affirmation, a lot of the queer art and literature that meant the most to me—think *Nightwood*, think *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, think Proust, think Kiki and Herb—was not at all about affirmation. And yet I found it deeply consoling. It was also my experience of being in different kinds of queer and lesbian communities that it was

possible to share experiences of exclusion in a way that I found profoundly consoling. It was my sense that academic accounts of queer life tended to leave out these kinds of experiences—in part because it's hard in a professional context to account for these dark, tender thrills and in part because of being beholden to a sense of political utility that I still think is too narrow. My sense of urgency about recognizing the parts of queer life we might like to ignore has only increased recently in light of the gay marriage decisions and the headlong rush to integration and assimilation in mainstream LGBT politics. There's a deep desire to see a lot of the old bad feelings we associate with being gay or lesbian disappear, but I think they are still very much with us. Even though the book can be kind of dark, I meant it to be consoling.

SEC: What do you think brings students to a queer studies class? What sense do you get of the emotional needs they bring that are different from the ones that would be in force in, say, a course on the modernist novel?

HL: I think students come to these classes for all kinds of reasons. There are of course students who have some kind of personal identification with the subject material, and they have a range of investments. I think there is something deeply important in that context of simply teaching in the field—affirming that this material is significant, that it has a place in the college curriculum, and that one could potentially devote oneself to scholarship on this topic, even over the course of a lifetime. I think sometimes students come into the classroom wanting other forms of affirmation, and that can be a bit tricky for me since a lot of what I work on is the difficulty or negative emotions of being a gender or sexual outsider. And I sometimes wonder if I am teaching these questions of gay shame or disidentification from a different generational perspective, and this is not what students want or need to hear. But I do think that my insistence on difficulty can be another way of getting to affirmation, at least in the context of my teaching. Acknowledging the difficulties that students may be going through can give them a better handle on how to make sense of their experience both personally and historically. And of course there is a certain affirmation that I communicate as being an out and visibly out professor in the classroom.

But as I said, I am very aware that people come to my queer studies class with a whole range of investments, from identification to curiosity and even at times with a kind of ambivalence or resistance. While I see myself as playing a very important role for queer-identified students, my more significant role is as teacher, and I need to find ways to connect with all of the students about this material. This really isn't too challenging, though, since questions of embodiment, intimacy, desire, and kinship are of concern to everyone.

SEC: Can you talk about your own experiences in coming to queer studies as an undergraduate and/or grad student? What was it like to be

able to specialize in a field that spoke about queer desires? What were the disappointments in that?

HL: I graduated from college in 1991, and I wasn't all that aware at the time of what was going on in the field of sexuality studies. I had some great experiences as an undergraduate studying feminist theory as well as doing some work on lesbian criticism. I would say at this time that my relation to burgeoning queer studies came more through an engagement with feminist sites, for instance through an obsession with the history of the feminist sex wars. Following debates about porn, s/m, and butch/femme was my way at the time of gaining access to some concerns—which in retrospect seem very queer—that I had not been able to access in my feminist education up to that point: sexual stigma, gender transgression, eroticism and power, and so on. I was out of school for several years, but when I arrived at grad school in 1996, I took a queer theory class my first year and a lot of things fell into place for me. I don't feel much disappointment about that moment, which was really transformative for me. I suppose I do feel the general let-down of embarking on a career and watching a lot of obsessions, hobbies, and everyday experiments in living turn into research topics—therefore leaving a lot less time for obsessions, hobbies, and everyday experiments in living.

SEC: Are there different, affective considerations that are in force when you're designing a course that's about queer issues? In my own experience, I struggle a lot more with the larger narrative the reading choices I make for a syllabus than I would for a nineteenth century US lit course: are these texts telling a triumphalist story that I'm not altogether comfortable with? Are they so oppositional that students might feel alienated? Is the trajectory ultimately sort of depressing? etc. etc. Do you have similar concerns?

HL: I think I resist the triumphalist narrative pretty hard, because it's really not something I believe in. I am teaching my big introductory queer studies course this term, "Queer Politics and Queer Communities" [at the University of Pennsylvania]. I started the class with a big sweeping history of homosexuality, getting some keywords and framing concepts out on the table. I ended that class by showing two images: first, an image from a gay liberation protest at NYU of a woman holding a sign that reads, "Gay Power / Black Power / Women Power / Student Power / All Power to the People"; and second, an image of Dan Savage with his boyfriend. I want to ask students to reflect on why we might think that things have gotten better since the early 1970s, and what better means in this context. I don't intend to alienate students who are invested in—who are, in fact, actively working for—the expansion of gay rights, and yet I also want them to be aware, from the start, of other moments and other agendas and the fact that things could have

worked out otherwise. I guess I find this sobering, but not depressing, and even from a certain perspective inspiring, and I hope I can communicate that complex of affects to the students—or at least give them the materials so that they can have their own response, but with a deeper sense of the multiple pasts that are in our present.

SEC: On the subject of Dan Savage, the “It Gets Better” campaign had a huge effect on campuses this past year. Did you find yourself being asked about it in relation to the focus of your book? What’s your sense of the campaign and its many iterations and offshoots?

HL: Yes, like a lot of people in the field, I was asked to comment on “It Gets Better” and also asked to make a video of my own. Of course, given my work, it seems pretty obvious how I might respond to this kind of project. And I do think it’s important to point out some of the limitations of the “It Gets Better” project: the way that it treats homophobia as an individual, local, time-bound problem rather than a structural one; the way that it promotes a homogenous image of gay life as fully adult, urban, gender normative, white, and prosperous; and the way that it condescends to queer youth, suggesting that they are not in the best situation to make sense of their experience. I am interested in the politics of refusal as an important aspect of queer experience and history, and there is a sense in which the “It Gets Better” project makes it impossible for queer youth to make a statement of refusal—either against the violent normativity they encounter in their families and in their schools, or against the normativity of a gay community which presents as out, proud, mature, and not depressed. I’m just not that sure that this is the message that queer youth needs or wants to hear. Nonetheless, I’ve been hesitant to criticize the project because a lot of people do seem to find its message really important, and in the face of that evidence my scruples aren’t all that important. Still, I am not sure that it is the message “It Gets Better” that people connect to in the project, because for me, watching the videos, what is most striking is that this is a pretty amazing archive of queer suffering and queer trauma. To me it’s just as likely that people connect with these videos because they identify with the stories people tell about themselves as it is that they connect with them because of their message of uplift.

SEC: How do you bring your ideas about “feeling backward” into the classroom? How do students respond to your call to think about uncomfortable feelings, disappointment, and resistance?

HL: Teaching on the question of queer historical experience – especially negative experience – is always really interesting because the generational question is so front and center. I am very aware that my students have had very different experiences from me—many of them were in gay-straight alliances in high school, they have often been out for sev-

eral years by the time they are taking a college class with me, and many of them feel that they are able to live in a world where sexual identity won't make much of a difference in their opportunities or their experience. Not only was my experience really different, but I also identify strongly with older generations of gays and lesbians, and with the experiences of sexual and gender minorities in history. I feel that it's my job to expand their focus a bit—to make them aware of these longer histories, and a broader range of experiences. Though I believe in this aspect of my pedagogy, I do sometimes wonder—am I just trying to bum them out? And if so, why? Maybe their experience is just different, and that is how change happens. But this is not where I end up. In some basic sense I think we are all bound to each other, and the classroom is one of the places where we can explore those invisible or disavowed connections across time or across communities or across experiences. But it has also been my experience that once I open the door for students to talk about the ongoing realities of homophobia, about how that feels, they have a lot to say on the topic. I think breaking out of the “post-gay” framework—which often seems less about satisfaction than about high-level coping—can be politically energizing for students, as well as provoking a sense of emotional recognition, and relief.

SEC: Given the way you approach queer studies, and your focus on the affective complexities of dealing with homophobia, how do you find your students react to your reading of ambivalence in Pater, Cather, and Hall? How does it interact with mainstream efforts to reclaim historical figures as uncomplicatedly gay?

HL: I don't find that students do resist these darker interpretations when we read queer literature. From my perspective, it takes a lot of work not to acknowledge ambivalence or sadness when you read these books. There is a reason Hall called it *The Well of Loneliness* after all. One of the things I like about teaching literature is that students get really caught up in the text, and we are tracking all the crazy, curious, mixed-up feelings in these books—without necessarily stopping to ask ourselves, Is this good for gay politics? Is this how X should have been feeling? When things go right, we can get pretty lost in the text. But at the same time I think that the frame around the entire experience is about reclaiming and affirming these historical figures—and sometimes, like saying grace, we stop to reflect on the historical development that allows us to be reading these texts in the context of a queer studies course being offered as part of a general university curriculum. That is lucky.

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