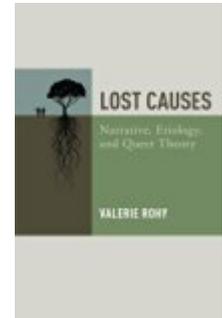


**Valerie Rohy.** *Lost Causes: Narrative, Etiology, and Queer Theory.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 248 pp. \$31.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-934020-0.



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The question of why people are lesbian or gay has been at the heart of modern discussions of homosexuality for more than a century. As is well known, etiological concerns about the causes and origins of homosexuality were central to early sexological and psychoanalytic debates from the late nineteenth century onward and continue to shape contemporary politics. The “born gay” argument that insists on the idea that homosexuality is inborn—a matter of hormones and genes and therefore natural and immutable—underpins much of mainstream pro-lesbian and gay politics. The notion that homosexuality might be the product of influence and choice, on the other hand, has often been marshalled by anti-gay voices and has, at times, been presented as intrinsically homophobic. Valerie Rohy’s monograph *Lost Causes: Narrative, Etiology, and Queer Theory* intervenes forcefully in these debates, first, by demonstrating what is at stake in relying on etiological narratives and, second, by suggesting novel ways in which we might move beyond etiological approaches to sexuality altogether.

Rohy builds on work by historians of medicine and science who have traced the development of etiological views of sexuality, primarily in sexology and psychoanalysis. In addition, her book engages with more recent biological debates about sexual etiology, including scientific attempts to identify the gay gene or brain, and their political appropriations. *Lost Causes* is also in close dialogue with previous scholarship, especially coming out of queer theory, which has challenged biological etiologies of sexuality on the grounds that such arguments assume categorical differences between heterosexuality and homosexuality, presenting sexuality as fixed and stable. Such scholarship has shown that the insistence on biological origins of sexual orientation does nothing to oppose homophobic ideas according to which homosexuality is a pathological condition. It has also demonstrated that the “born gay” rhetoric is complicit with the idea that homosexuality is a less desirable alternative to heterosexuality that no one would possibly want to “choose.”

Rohy makes an original contribution to these debates by sidestepping any tired discussion of nature versus nurture or biological essentialism versus social constructionism. She asserts that “what is needed is not a better, more accurate, or more sensible etiology of homosexuality, but a fundamental change in this discourse—a change in and through etiology itself” (p. 4). To work toward this change, Rohy highlights the similarities between different etiological approaches, which, she argues, are either fueled by or responsive to homophobic fears of “*homosexual reproduction*—not literal gay parenting, but the fantasy of proliferation through seduction, influence, recruitment, pedagogy, predation, and contagion” (p. 2). What the anti-gay campaigner arguing that homosexuality is a choice and the pro-gay activists insisting that we are “born gay” have in common is their resistance to the idea that homosexuals can and do multiply in numbers. Yet, as Rohy states, “a gay activist agenda determined to repudiate whatever makes heterosexuals uneasy is doomed forever to perpetuate those anxieties” (p. 5).

Instead of resisting the possibility of homosexual transmission and multiplication, *Lost Causes* investigates “what happens when we acknowledge and even embrace the abject tropes of homosexual reproduction” (p. 5). Rohy boldly affirms that homosexuality can be passed on and will increase, as marriage and other civil rights become available to some gays and lesbians, “widening the space of possibility in which it [homosexuality] becomes visible as a livable life” (p. 54). Yet, crucially, her book also sets out to interrogate conventional notions of cause and effect as well as reproduction. To do so, Rohy foregrounds the narrative dimensions of etiology and causality, making a strong and convincing case for the need to read “homosexual etiologies as narrative forms” (p. 4). In particular, she draws on methodologies provided by literary studies and psychoanalysis. Literature and psychoanalytic thought do not simply create etiological narratives but also provide the critical tools to read such narra-

tives against themselves to reveal “the complexity *within* notions of homosexual reproduction and extend beyond conventional cause and effect to discover retroactive, absent, contingent, and impossible causalities” (p. 8).

The opening chapter of *Lost Causes* works through anxieties surrounding homosexual reproduction in contemporary American culture. It includes a particularly astute reading of the “vulgar Darwinism” underpinning “defensive etiologies” marshalled by both anti- and pro-gay campaigners (p. 55). The subsequent chapters offer careful close analyses of a number of canonical and lesser-known British and American novels and forms of life writing. Rohy first turns to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), a novel deeply concerned with seduction and corruption. Homosexuality has been viewed as both the cause and effect of Dorian’s deviance, especially in light of the Wilde trials and Wilde’s subsequent status as gay icon, yet gay desire remains unnamed and unconfirmed in the novel itself. Rohy argues that the novel and its reception reveal the working of “retroactive causality”: “homosexuality *causes itself*” when it is belatedly imposed on the novel, which itself celebrates “bad” influence and the proliferation of perversion (pp. 78, 79). Yet, in resisting any straightforward logic of cause and effect, the book also works against “the closure of etiological narratives,” which cannot contain the “queerness of sexuality as such” (p. 79). In the following chapter, James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912 and 1927) affords Rohy an opportunity to explore what is at stake in viewing sexual and racial identity not as inborn characteristics but as mutable and chosen. The text exposes how blackness and homosexuality are drawn on, in different ways, to construct and invent retrospectively an “original” identity.

The next chapter engages with Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), a novel that, like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, has been accused

of corrupting British youth. Rohy develops further her ideas about influence and corruption by focusing on “the queer scene of reading” (p. 106). She unpacks how *The Well of Loneliness* troubles etiologies by demonstrating that queer subjects are not only reflected in writing but also invented through the act of reading. Homosexual reproduction through queer reading, Rohy insists, is both about “reading as an identity-machine” and about “reading as an eternal deferral of meaning” in which identity categories are never ultimately confirmed (p. 137). Moving on to the 1980s and the HIV/AIDS crisis, Rohy explores genealogical tropes in Paul Monette’s memoir *Borrowed Time* (1988). She offers an insightful examination of how the author, in the face of a future foreclosed by AIDS, turns to the historical past, including the classical and medieval world, to “find” and, in so doing, produce homosexual ancestors. For Rohy, this form of backward homosexual reproduction works against a heteronormative reproductive model: insisting on a lateral and brotherly form of “kinship without linear genealogy,” the text signals a queer refusal of genealogical causality (p. 142).

*Lost Causes* closes with a brilliant reading of Sarah Water’s novel *The Night Watch* (2006), through which Rohy develops the concept of contingent causality. Instead of relying on etiological narratives according to which we are either “born this way” or lesbian and gay due to corruption, influence, or choice, Rohy argues that it is time to acknowledge the “random, irrational, and undecidable” causes of sexuality (p. 177). The chapter leads to powerful conclusions: embracing the myth of homosexual reproduction means “imagining a world in which *more* homosexuals are welcome [which] is essential to producing a world in which *any* homosexuals are welcome” (p. 186). Yet, for Rohy, homosexual reproduction must also involve a “queer reproduction of difference” that necessarily “troubles the security of identities and institutions” (p. 191).

Rohy’s book presents a series of highly innovative readings of literary texts and makes a significant contribution to existing work within queer theory. In particular, it builds on and contributes to debates about queer time, which have sought to disrupt the linear, progressive, causal, and reproductive logic of “straight” temporalities. Rohy acknowledges key authors like Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Elizabeth Freeman, Jack Halberstam, and Kathrin Bond Stockton. Yet, given Freeman’s and, indeed, Rohy’s own earlier work on anachronism, it is striking that the chronological structure of the book and her close engagement with predominantly historical literary texts remain untheorized. There are also some oversights with regard to existing scholarship, such as Annamarie Jagose’s study of sequentiality, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (2002), which could have been brought into productive dialogue with Rohy’s interrogation of causality.

Given the important interventions Rohy makes throughout the book, there is no doubt that *Lost Causes* will find enthusiastic readers among literary scholars and queer theorists. Historians of sexuality and science, especially those interested in the histories of sexology, psychoanalysis, and evolutionary theory as well as censorship and obscenity, may find Rohy’s engagement with the existing historiography and available sources cursory. Yet this is all the more reason to engage with Rohy’s arguments about etiological thought and to explore the strong potential of her work to inform and enrich these and other areas of historical investigation.

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