Micropolitics

Leo Bersani and conflicts in contemporary feminism

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> …as if the molecular were in the realm of the imagination and applied only to the individual.
>
> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'Micropolitics and Segmentarity'[1]

There is something taking shape in Western feminist theory, something so drastic – and, to speak from an intellectualist frame of reference, so exciting – that it can only be characterized along the lines of what Thomas Kuhn famously termed a 'paradigm shift'. In accordance with the Kuhnian picture, this shift has been anything but gradual and benevolent. Rather, it is characterized by a violent moment of epistemic rupture in which a new wave of feminist theorists has produced a body of work aimed at erasing the stable, consensual core of grounding assumptions and axiological imperatives that previously defined the field.[2]

One of the principal terms of contention in the discursive war between 'old-style' feminists, a group committed to a certain set of foundational assumptions, and the vanguard of feminist theory, committed not only to a new set of foundations, but, perhaps more radically, to articulating foundations that are always-already placed under a permanent interrogative vanishing ('foundations exist only to be put into question'[3]), revolves around the problem of how best to theorize actions aimed at contesting oppressive power structures. At the risk of participating in a taxonomic enterprise that is reductive at best, insidiously divisive at worse, let me make some generalizations about the different positions on this matter as they are found within the two categories 'old' and 'new' feminism.

It would not be a mischaracterization to write that old-style feminism views anti-hegemonic agency as a collective effort between subjects who have a definite idea of the moral wrong(s) embodied by the power(s) that they wish to contest. Furthermore, old-style feminism argues that broad structural changes can only arise when large numbers of people realize that they are oppressed, and begin *collectively* to struggle against their oppression. As old-style feminism sees it, new feminism uses a certain *mélange* of post-structuralism, post-modernism, and Freudian/post-Freudian psychoanalysis to put forth nihilistic meditations on the impossibility of a coherent programme for political change. For example, old-style feminists attribute the following argument to Judith Butler, whose works *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies that Matter* and *The Psychic Life of Power* are often construed as the apogee of the new feminism: since the human subject, particularly the oppressed human subject, is formed – both as a psychic being and as an object within the social Symbolic – by the powers (s)he wishes to contest, any attempt at total escape from those oppressive powers will fail. One can only struggle from within the matrix of the dominating powers, placing oneself within their interstices and fissures of meaning in order to practise a kind of semiotic subversion. Parody, rather than collective action, provides the tropological inroad through which these subversive acts can occur, and, by the very limitations of scope which parody-as-trope presupposes, the possibility of sweeping structural change ought to be relegated to the rubble of anachronistic Utopianism. Anti-hegemonic agential acts are *micro-acts* in which a subject takes on the terms of domination and, in the process of reiterating those terms, engages in a set of strategic parodies in which *they* (both the terms and the subject who reiterates) are reconfigured and partially de-formed.

Of course, the terms used to 'describe' a body of intellectual work often implicitly encode a critical opinion of that work, or, at the very least, are geared towards opening the space for the formation of such critical opinions. As such, when old-style feminists describe new feminism's valorization of the ironic, reiterating subject, they do so in order to ground a somewhat more contentious claim. They argue that according to new feminism the subversion of power can only be effectuated through individual, rather than collective, action. To reach this conclusion, old-style feminists make the following logical leap: even if new feminists do not explicitly say that agency is purely about the individual, theorizing power in the way that they do *ipso facto* renders anti-hegemonic agency a private affair. (Often, the supposedly Foucauldian tone of such an individualistic view of agency serves to link new feminism with queer studies, even though these movements (sometimes) wish to remain apart.)

Putting aside the plausibility of the logical move that informs the claim that new feminism articulates an ethics and a politics aimed only at a knowing subject who acts in isolation from collective movements – a claim that, in the end, says only that new feminism, for all its supposed Francophilia, remains caught within a distinctively American provenance of the individual[4] – I wish to examine it on the surface level of its enunciation. Are those feminist and, more broadly, queer theories that focus on the resisting subject really as unequivocal about the impossibility of collective action as old-style feminists make them out to be? Are some of the theories that seem to be demolishing politics in favour of a solipsistic sum of tiny 'ethical' acts in actuality struggling against this very solipsism?

This article will examine two books by the celebrated queer theorist Leo Bersani in so far as they engage with such questions.[5] It will suggest that there is a marked shift between *The Freudian Body* (1986) and *Homos* (1995), a shift whose *raison d'être* is Bersani's attempt to distance himself from the solipsistic view of ethical agency articulated in the former.[6] It will attempt to show that while Bersani initially held that it is micro-ethical acts, rather than large scale politics, that pose a challenge to the heteronormative order, his later work points to a provocative new way of thinking about the link between individual acts of subversion and collective action. Moving back into the larger discussion of new feminism versus old feminism, I will argue that Bersani's work provides us with a glimpse of the beginnings of a crucial project: to negotiate new-feminist discussions of micro-agency with 'old-style' exhortations for collective action. In case I am misunderstood, let it be said that this article does not wish to suggest that new feminists must read Bersani in order to undertake such a negotiation. I can think of no better way to foreclose the possibility of radical thought than to argue that group *X must* read person *Y*. I only wish to argue that Bersani's work is one possible route through which one might begin.

The Freudian Body

In *The Freudian Body*, Bersani uses a deconstructive reading of Freud to provide a possible account of the genesis of sexuality. What emerges is the thesis that sexuality is a mode of psychic organization which attempts to contain and make sense of the excess of external stimuli continually pounding upon the vulnerable ego.[7] Specifically, sexuality refers to the process by which these stimuli are bound into a narrative in which the ego is the sovereign author. But if sexuality produces a stable ego, it also tears it apart. Or, in more Bersanian terms: while sexuality is a mode of managing stimuli, it is simultaneously the very thing that continually overflows the ego, exceeding its capacity to remain in control. What keeps the ego from disintegrating is that it comes to find its own shattering pleasurable. That is, it eroticizes its own inability to form complete narratives, to possess unequivocally external stimuli.

In effect, eroticization allows the continual undoing of the self. Sexual pleasure is inextricably bound to masochism – a category which, in Bersani, is wrenched from its status as sexual deviance to become what Mandy Merck calls 'an inherited survival mechanism'.[8] Masochism allows the restructuring of the self after the destabilizing moment of sexuality. The masochistic impulse, and the sexuality it (re)produces, *saves* the subject when it encounters that which overwhelms it and threatens it with its own dissolution.[9]

Obviously, theorizing the aetiology of a psychic phenomenon necessitates using a language concerned with the individual subject. But the language that Bersani uses to craft his account of sexuality's genesis is subject-centred to a degree beyond what is necessitated by the nature of the project itself. In a key passage, Bersani writes:

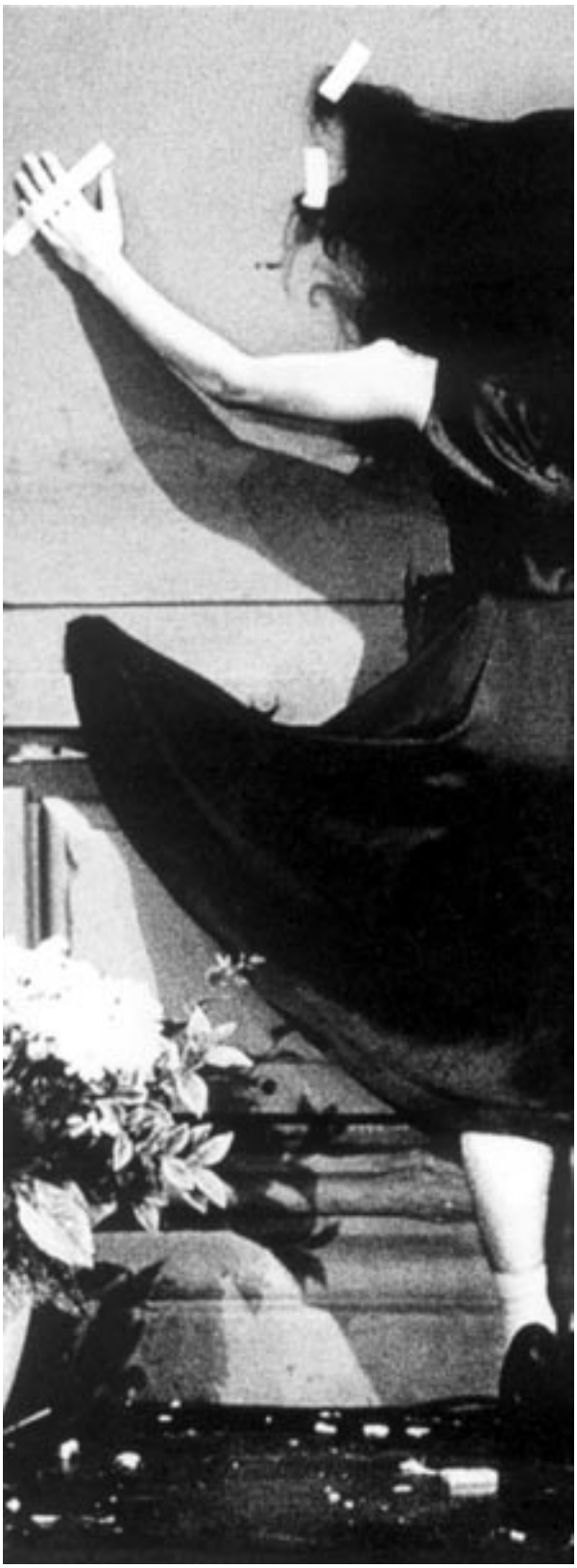
> Human sexuality is constituted as a kind of psychic shattering, as a threat to the stability and integrity of the self – a threat which perhaps only the masochistic nature of sexual pleasure allows us to survive … sexuality is indissociable from masochism. The painful conflicts which accompany childhood sexuality, far from merely leading us to its ex-

> tinction, actually contribute to its continuity and power. We would not have a sequence of sexuality, conflict, and extinction; rather, the conflicts, oppositions, and failures would perhaps contribute to the intensification necessary for the sexualization of the mental process. The compulsion to repeat … could therefore be understood as a permanent tendency *on the part of the ego to resexualize its structure*.[10]

Here it seems as though the subject's shattering *qua* sexuality comes about through the interplay between a bulk of undifferentiated external phenomenon and his/her own psychic apparatus, an apparatus which must guard against the ruptural possibilities *presenced* by the absolutely Other. What Bersani omits is the agency of the Other, the role that the Other plays in shattering me (my psyche) into sexuality. For instance, Bersani writes that the ego has the tendency 'to resexualize its structure', instead of writing that the Other – and whether the Other is to be construed as the big Other of the Lacanian Symbolic or the always singular Levinasian Other makes little difference here[11] – *shatters me* into resexualizing my structure. Between the statement 'I am shattered' and 'the Other shatters me' something like the agency of the Other vanishes. By allowing the psychic phenomenon of sexuality to absorb the role that the Other plays, any fraying of the ego is contained within the logic of the ego itself. (In this vein, 'the painful conflicts of childhood' are not theorized as the result of very real sexual encounters with the Other, as they often are in the work of Jean Laplanche.[12]) To adopt momentarily a quasi-Hegelian voice: the role that the human Other plays in presenting itself as a phenomenon to be dialectically absorbed and refused by the subject's psyche is negated when Bersani writes as though the ambivalent movements of sexuality arise purely due to facts about the subject's own psyche. Sexuality may be a fraying of the self, but Bersani fails to make explicit the fact that the Other plays an agentive role in that fraying.

Bersani covers over the fact that there is always *a someone* who plays the active role in presenting my ego with the excess quantities of stimuli that initiate my sexuality. Sexuality may be a psychic shattering, but if the link between sexuality and the subject who experiences it is that 'we desire what nearly shatters us',[13] one needs an intersubjective account of desire as desire of the Other, an account Bersani will not provide, if one is to construe sexuality as anything but the movement of the same. By ignoring the Other, Bersani's text has the end result of making us think that sexuality is all about my own ego-structures and their internal, ambivalent play.

The Freudian Body not only provides an account of the individual's entry into sexuality, but also gestures toward a discussion of the ethics of sexuality. For Bersani, these two components perpetually bleed into one another. At one point he states quite explicitly that his descriptive project of tracing sexuality's origins is meant to open up his fragmentary discussions of sexual ethics: 'Descriptive discourse … prescribes



those very moves [which] create the only permissible logical conditions for the formulation of radically other sexual regimes and radically other moves of consciousness.'[14]

Given, then, that sexual ethics are bound to the description of sexuality's genesis, the negation of the Other in the latter domain has profound consequences for the former. Because Bersanian sexuality is always about *my* shattering in the presence of the Other, rather than about the Other who shatters me, the sexual ethics he provides is mostly about *my* relation to a sexual Other, a relation that, in Bersani's most yearning, existential moments, is constructed around a decision on the part of the self-present subject to relinquish his own sovereignty.

Jonathan Dollimore suggests that Bersanian ethics lies in the subject's recognition of the value of powerlessness, but

> by powerlessness [Bersani] means not gentleness, non-aggressiveness, or even passivity, but rather the potential for a radical disintegration and humiliation of the self … a kind of death.[19]

How does ethics as a 'radical disintegration … a kind of death' play out in *The Freudian Body*? In answering this question, the reader is forced to piece together some disparate fragments. In the early parts of the text, Bersanian sexual ethics are modelled around a psychoanalytically informed deconstructive ethics of reading. The first chapter of *The Freudian Body* continually alludes to the ethical promise contained within psychoanalytic meditations on the 'fundamental failure in the operations of thought', or in the resistance of certain literary authors to 'the domesticating clarities of narrative orders'.[16] Since Bersani holds that the self is a narrativized structure – a structure that calls itself into being by crafting narratives in which it is the subject – deconstructive ethical protocols point to the necessity of privileging the indeterminacy and instability of the self. To be ethical is to erase one's capacity to make authoritative statements by erasing one's conception of oneself as a grounding unit; it is to refuse continually to consider oneself at home in the narrative world one creates.[17]

The ethical moment in sex has a structure parallel to the ethical moment in Bersani's model of deconstructive self-reading. In the textual ethical moment one realizes that one is never the self-same subject of one's own narrativization. Similarly, sexual ethics arise when one realizes that the sexual act is not an exchange of intensities between sovereign subjects, but is instead 'a condition of broken negotiations in which others merely set of the self-shattering mechanisms of masochistic *jouissance*.'[18]

In this formulation we once again see the movement towards the Other negated by the eventual erasure of the Other within the same. The role that the Other plays in allowing me to enter into sexual ethics is minimal at best; the Other 'merely sets off' the mechanisms of my own psyche, and it is the play of my psychic mechanisms, rather than the very facticity of the Other, which eventually interacts with my conscious self. Crucially, on this model ethics becomes a private act. That is, if we accept with Lacan the notion that *jouissance* is outside the circuit of the Symbolic; that, as Dylan Evans writes, 'the subject's entry into the symbolic is conditional upon a certain … renunciation of *jouissance*',[19] then any sexual ethic modelled around one's own 'masochistic *jouissance*' appears to be both private and unspeakable.

We may plausibly say, then, that in *The Freudian Body* ethics begins with the subject's *decision* to travel along an unspeakable aporia.[20] It begins with the subject's *decision* to realize that sexuality is not what he once thought it was – a movement between two contained subjects in which the object of one's appropriation is firmly separable from oneself as appropriating subject.[21] Of course ethics also has some positive content. It *is* – or at the very least begins with – the realization that sexuality is an erasure of the boundaries between subjects, an erasure that erases the possibility of a sovereign subject of choice. To be ethical is to realize that the demarcation between self and Other is temporarily yet terrifyingly lost, though eventually regained, in one's *jouissance*.

In an essay on Freud and Resnais, Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit write that sexuality is both 'the ecstatic loss of the appropriated identity', and the '*jouissance* of self loss'. That is, in the sexual moment I both lose the outlines of the identity that I am trying to appropriate and, in the process of losing these outlines, lose the outlines of myself. When one moves to sexual ethics, however, it seems as though ethics is activated when one reappropriates this knowledge of sexuality for the conscious self. To stretch the point a bit, one might argue that ethics is less about self-divestiture than it is about nonerotic sadism, a phenomenon which Bersani and Dutoit describe as 'the sadism of an affectless mastery of the world'.[22]

Because ethics is firmly located within my own ambivalent, self-deconstructive psyche, one that mimics the deconstructive 'experience' of unyielding structural indeterminacy, it becomes hard to see how it could effectuate change in anything but the lives of

myself and those with whom I have sexual encounters, though the category of 'sexual encounters' must be broadened to include all self-shattering interactions. (Or does it? Bersani sometimes writes against exploding the specificity of sex.) There seems to be no sweeping structural changes brought about by this ethics, only vigilant self-awareness and care towards singular Others.

The tensions of Bersanian sexual ethics are brought to a head in what is perhaps the most explicit ethical call offered in *The Freudian Body*, the passage in which the reader is presented with an alternative between an unethical 'destructive fixation on anecdotal violence', and the ethical 'psychic dislocations of mobile desire'.[23] Here again, the ethical becomes: (a) an act of choosing to relinquish choosing (Bersani, in an explicitly humanist move, even phrases the alternative as a 'choice'); (b) an injunction to understand that one's desire blurs the demarcations of one's psyche; and (c) fundamentally unspeakable, for one cannot plausibly read the 'dislocation of desire' as the sort of thing that can have an explicit entry into public language.[24]

In an article on Bersani and Lacan, H.N. Lukas writes that both thinkers hold that 'ethics precedes and determines the … identity and desire of the subject'.[25] But while it may be the case the Bersanian ethics (ontologically) precedes the identity of the subject, the ethical (as ontic content) is only opened when an identifiable subject consciously makes the decision to accept it. Whether this implies that the ethical (performatively?) individuates the subject is a moot point.[26]

One possible objection to these criticisms of Bersani is that they collapse the distinction between *ethics*, which refers to the domain of individuals who choose – or, in the case of Levinas, who are chosen – to act in certain ways towards individual Others, with *politics*, which is about larger (provisional) totalities of social interaction. This distinction is rendered less relevant, however, by the movements of Bersani's text. At several junctures in *The Freudian Body*, Bersani wishes to provide a ground for eradicating forms of sexual violence, an issue that is clearly acutely political. Since nothing like a counter-politics is even preliminarily discussed, we are left to conclude either that Bersani is only interested in the banal task of pointing out that sexual violence is a problem, or that he feels that the ethics delineated can help to solve the problem in so far as it has aggregative effects similar to that of politics (or is synonymous with politics itself). When Bersani writes of the 'catastrophic symptom[s] of our refusal to recognize the violence in which our sexuality is grounded',[27] I take him to be implicitly arguing that the recognition of the sexual ethical act, which becomes nothing but the ethical act of recognizing the sexual as such, is what can prevent these 'catastrophic symptoms'. As he never explicitly says that he is discussing ethics and not politics, or that he assumes politics to be beyond the scope of his work, the conclusion that the reader must make is that Bersani draws no clear distinction between ethics and politics. Once this conclusion is made, it seems as though Bersani is arguing that we will be on our way to eradicating certain forms of sexual violence when enough individuals undergo the ethical epiphany of realizing the self-shattering potential of sexuality.

Reading Bersani's ethics, then, as the only mode of politics available to his work, let us return to the discussion of feminisms, old and new. As I have characterized it thus far, Bersani's work can be firmly located within the old feminists' critical charge against new feminism, for in *The Freudian Body* we find a sanctioned disregard of larger, collective struggles in favour of a discussion of individual acts of micro-ethical agency. I would like to suggest, however, that Bersani's *Homos* – published nine years after *The Freudian Body* and after an emerging block of work had been allowed to consolidate itself at least partially under the oppositional sign of 'new feminism' (thereby opening the emergent space for its critique) – arises out of a desire to revise the solipsism of the ethical and provide an alternative to the orthodoxies of both old and new feminisms.

Shattered into the social: *Homos*

Homos sees itself as an attempt to address a number of issues in both the academic discipline of queer studies and in queer society at large. At the risk of inflicting epistemic violence on Bersani by reorganizing his unruly work around neat schemata, one might argue that the book is concerned with the following three (interrelated) issues: (1) Though arguments over the historical construction of gender and heterosexuality have undoubtedly done something to further the queer cause, their effects have been at best minimal and have, at worst, erased the ground from which queers can resist homophobia.[28] As Tim Dean writes, the historicizing impulse threatens to 'eviscerat[e] gayness of all substantive attributes'.[29] (2) The current theoretical milieu has given rise to a situation in which queers feel that the only agency available to them is the micro-agency involved in subverting the dominant terms by which they are constructed. Queers have resigned themselves to the 'micropolitics of local struggles … revealing political ambitions about as stirring as

those reflected on the bumper stickers that enjoin us to "think globally" and "act locally".'[30] These micro-subversions of the dominant terms don't in fact destabilize the dominant terms but instead shore them up. For in parodying the dominant one does nothing more than reveal one's desire to be accepted in any possible way by it.[31] (3) Queer celebrations of queerness that attempt something more than micro-politics end up locating queer radicalism in concepts that are the product of the heteronormative order. For example, queers find themselves arguing that the radical promise of queerness lies in its heightened potential for democratic interactions, ignoring the fact that the very structurations of democratic interactions have also produced the most rampant forms of homophobia.[32] This grasping for inclusion in the dominant models of the social, along with the historicizing impulse, threatens to make invisible the crucial fact that the Otherness of homo-*ness* is not simply an intensified embodiment of heterosexual relationality, or even a parodic repetition of those relations, but a genuine alternative, one that should maintain its position of marginality precisely so that it can ground radicalism.

It is issues 2 and 3 that most concern me here. As this schematic description of *Homos* shows, Bersani dis-identifies himself with (supposedly) Butlerian valorizations of micro-subversions as well as with social-constructivists' – whatever that term now means – (supposed) refusal of the body, a refusal that one (supposedly) finds throughout new feminism. One might therefore object to reading Bersani as anything but an old-style feminist dressed in queer drag. That is, one might argue that, since Bersani (now) appears to believe in collective, macro-action, and since he is interested in bodies and their anatomies, one cannot use him to show that old-style feminism's characterization of new feminism is reductive, precisely because he is not a new feminist. However, this dismissal is too hasty, for Bersani does register profound differences with many of the tenets of old-style feminism. For instance, in *The Freudian Body*, sadomasochism and passivity, terms which many old-style feminists see as loaded with the ideology of violent patriarchal masculinity, are given a profoundly ethical import. And in 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' Bersani explicitly rejects old-style feminism as it is represented by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon, charging these thinkers with crafting a liberal image of ideal sexuality as inherently about 'the natural conjunction of … tenderness and love'.[33] Given that Bersani straddles both camps (so to speak), I propose that rather than reductively read him into an either/or position between old and new feminisms, one should read him as a thinker who refuses the idea that there is a necessary gap between micro-agency and collective action, a thinker who divorces himself from the dogmas of both camps (which is not to say that both camps are dogmatic) – micro-agency: 'good, *chic* po-mo politics', collective action: 'outdated Utopianism' (new feminism

as it is characterized by old-style feminism); micro-agency: 'solipsistic nihilism', collective action: 'moral good' (old-style feminism's self-characterization) – in order to show how micro-agency and collective action can be reconciled. (Or, to go a step further, in order to show that the opposition between micro-agency and collective action depends on constructing a false opposition between the individual and the collective.) The final chapter of *Homos*, 'The Gay Outlaw', provides the ground for such a reading, even though Bersani does not explicitly place it in any discussion of feminism old and new, or micro-agency versus collective action. Rather, his professed project is to read Gide, Proust and Genet in order to think about the relation between sexual orientation and political personhood. More broadly, Bersani's attempt is to grapple with possible models of transgression that do not merely reinstate the terms they wish to transgress – models which offer subversive effects beyond the parodic, pointing to ways in which queers can redefine community so that it becomes 'less indebted to … the communal virtues elaborated by those who want us to disappear'.[34]

What Bersani finds in all three authors is a profound homophobia and/or self-loathing, but also, simultaneously, a challenge to reformulate queer community. This challenge comes in an injunction to 'eliminat[e] from sex any relation whatsoever', to erase 'relationality itself'.[35] What might this striking claim mean? What might it mean to withdraw from any relation to the Other, and how might this 'act' lead to the formation of a new community? Before attempting to answer these difficult questions, it is important to see that for Bersani absconding from relationality is essentially a performative move: it is a temporary shock to the system of liberal modes of intersubjectivity. In so far as this challenge constitutes a genuine political threat it is 'because of the energies it releases, energies made available for unprecedented projects of human organization'.[36] In other words, whatever it might mean to remove oneself from relationality, to do so is important because it unhinges the social interactions that, within the heterosexist Imaginary, have acquired the status of the Real (used here in the sense of that which is foreclosed in the Symbolic); it is a movement that inaugurates the imaging and imagining of a new erotics, of a new being-in-the-world, though it also acknowledges the unknowability of the form that this being-together will take. As Lauren Berlant writes, in 'a radical social theory of sexual citizenship', the erasure of relationality can be seen as 'a foundational condition for the next steps, which … remain to be taken, seen, and critiqued'.[37]

Let me first attempt to describe what Bersani himself means by this erasure, before returning the terms of the discussion to the problematic of the unit of agentive action. On one hand, the erasure of relationality involves suspending the ontological pictures by which the Other is known, comprehended, so that the Other can bear down on one as corporeal weight. But lest I make Bersani into a Levinasian, it should be noted that Bersani is not writing against the totalizing effects of ontology writ large, but rather a particular ontological picture, namely our attempts at 'a radical psychology of desire', what he also calls our insistence on engaging in 'an essentially doomed and generally anguished interrogation of others' desires'.[38] (And Bersani appears to have in mind the attempts of each individual subject to construct such an interrogation as well as the popular and academic discourses on sexuality, a double sense that already begins to undo the opposition between the subject and its discursive production.) This insistence 'immobilizes the human subject in its persuasive demonstration of an irreducible, politically unfixable antagonism between external reality and the structures of desire'.[39] Doesn't the psychology described here come remarkably close to the one operative in the dogged insistence on the distinction between the individual and the collective? Isn't the result of our interrogation of the Other's desire nothing but a desire to maintain a firm demarcation between the boundaries of the self and the collective of Other(s) with whom one is in proximity? If we may answer 'yes' to these questions, we may also believe that some part of Bersani's argument addresses the tension between an agency of the subject and an agency of the collective.

At the level of 'agency', the erasure of relationality involves a refusal to engage with concepts such as personhood and subjectivity[40] – to refuse the relational is to hold that these terms are so infected by the assumptions of the heteronormative order that to accept them in even the most subversive, ironic way will eradicate the possibility of a genuine queer revolution. In his most striking textual enactment of the movement between the self and its Others at stake here, Bersani writes that renouncing relationality

> proposes that we move irresponsibly among other bodies, somewhat indifferent to them, demanding nothing more than that they be as available to contact as we are, and that, no longer owned by others, they also renounce self-ownership and agree to that loss of boundaries which will allow them to be,

with us, shifting points of rest in *a universal and mobile communication* of being.[41]

Bersani's examples of this model of anti-relationality seem, on the surface, to map onto the discussions of sexual ethics offered in *The Freudian Body*. In Gide's *The Immoralist*, Michel's self-effacing (fantasized) pederasty becomes an ethical lifestyle by which 'he risks his own boundaries, risks knowing where he ends and the other begins'. In Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Marcel's jealousy of homosexuality in the other sex evokes a spiral of self-realizations in which 'the internalized interiority of otherness … [becomes] … the experienced otherness of his own interiority', an experience which saves him from the 'ecstasy of monadic self-containment'. And in Genet's *Prisoner of Love*, Genet's necrophilic and cannibalistic fantasies of his dead lover Jean become his self-shattering refusal to relate to evil as though it were simply the Other of the good.[42]

While one might translate all of these incidents into *The Freudian Body*'s thematic of the self, in *Homos* they have taken on a profoundly different meaning. In Gide, Michel's pederasty is exemplary not because of its capacity for self-debasement, but because in rejecting personhood it rejects the disciplinary intentions of the Law.[43] Furthermore, Michel's loss of a sense of boundary prompts a critique of property relations (understood here in the sense of ownership of the Other by the self). Bersani writes: '[Michel's] pederasty provides a sensual motive for an attack on all forms of property – on the self that belongs to him and also on all his possessions.'[44] Proust's ethics lie not in his elucidation of the way in which self-shattering saves the individual subject, though of course Bersani does not deny that Proust's work does show this as well, but because by establishing the 'aversion of inverts to the society of inverts' Proust points to the need for shattering the basis of the queer social bond as it currently stands.[45] A similar trajectory could be shown for Bersani's reading of Genet, though its sheer complexity prevents me from taking up the task here.

To draw some general conclusions, one might say that whereas *The Freudian Body* envisions psychic shattering as the privileged modality in which an ethics of the self could emerge, *Homos* is interested in the ways in which the agency of *a subject* opens a space out of which an ethical community *of subjects* can emerge. In a more political vein, what Bersani says of Gide, Proust and Genet is that the actions of their protagonists desediment the egoism of the self, the very egoism which forms an originary prohibition against the possibility of truly radical politics. Their actions point to ways in which we can prevent 'revolutionary action [from returning] … to relations of ownership and dominance'.[46]

Without first seeing how the injunction to erase relationality might work or have worked in an actual political struggle, we can at the very least read it as offering a genuine conceptual alternative to the binaries of the micro-politics/collective agency debate. In the examples given in 'The Gay Outlaw', we have a series of individuals – and it makes little difference whether these individuals are simply protagonists in novels, signs for actual social actors, or, I might add, 'enabling fictions'[47] that allow us to imagine new organizations of reality – engaging in particular micro-acts: pederasty, jealously, and so on. But these acts are lauded not merely because they illuminate the ways in which individuals challenge the norms that define them, not even because they have collective effects, effects for and on other individuals, but because they bring to light the ontological bivalence of radical subjectivity itself, its interminable movement between the individual and the collective, its refusal to decide on the primacy of either. A radical subjectivity mandates that the micro-politics of the subject be valorized precisely when these acts relate to a collective beyond the self. In *Homos*, Bersani locates the ethical promise in those situations in which one shatters oneself and Others *to begin a community* for all Others – that is, in which shattering shatters the boundary between self and community. The fact that many of the basic theoretical concepts of *Homos* – self-shattering, to take the most notable example – are in no sense a rupture with the conceptual architecture of *The Freudian Body* points to a crucial possibility: there is no necessary reason for an analysis of the subject to ignore the question of community; it involves a kind of leftist labour of the concept to keep both at hand.

If, for a moment, one wishes to engage this labour and use Bersani's work to provide something like a generalized normative injunction, it would be: as a member of a marginalized community, praise those acts of micro-agency on the part of members of your community which can lead to collective effects; try to foster an atmosphere in which individuals feel that their actions can bring new communities into being. This, note, is not a type of moralizing existentialism: act as though you are acting for all. Bersani does not claim that individuals should not act for purely solipsistic reasons – in fact, doing a solipsistic violence to the Other might be the precondition for sustaining one's own psychic life (and it is this very fact which

prohibits us from thinking of psychoanalysis as leading directly to any particular set of political commitments). But Bersani does claim that we can and should find an ethical promise in those solipsistic acts which, in excess of their solipsism, tend toward the possibilities of new communities for self and Other.

I have a suspicion that old-style feminists have largely ignored the work of Leo Bersani because it does not lend itself to the drawing of divisive battle lines. Bersani himself does not seem to be entirely at home with new feminists like Judith Butler, and yet he is equally out of joint with the concerns of old-style feminists. More importantly, I think that he has been ignored because it is through an examination of his work that one might begin to reconcile camps that sometimes seem to prefer to remain divided, precisely because remaining divided allows one to construe one's theoretical critiques, rather than anything resembling 'political' action, as somehow serving the greater good of all those Othered – in diverse ways – by the heteronormative order. If we keep the battle lines drawn, I am suggesting, we can take ourselves to be doing politics when we write articles histrionically declaring that one's new feminist opponents 'collaborat[e] with evil'.[48]

If as I have suggested, one reads Bersani's *Homos* as a work that struggles to show how individual acts of throwing off relationality allow new communities to come into being, we can see how one might begin to negotiate micro-politics with collective action. This has, admittedly, involved the running together of two sets of distinctions (individual/collective and micro/macro) when one of Deleuze and Guattari's central points in 'Micropolitics and Segmentarity' is precisely that the micro/macro distinction traverses the individual/collective divide.[49] It is not my intention to ignore this crucial point; I quote Deleuze and Guattari because it is precisely their unworking of this opposition that allows me at least to mention another set of questions apropos Bersani and his relation to feminism. In what way does Bersani's marginal status within the field allow his work to undo the opposition between individual and collective which structures the terms of debate? In *Homos* do we not find an argument for ontologically irreducible 'lines of flight' between the subject and its collective Others, so that to insist that one has *either* the subject *or* the collective forecloses the possibility of both a radical subject and a radical collective (a curious logic no doubt)?[50]

Critique and the critic

Given my complicity here with the object of my critique (acting as though an individualized and idiosyncratic – perhaps parodic – reading of a text is politics, or even the beginning of politics) I should return (once again) to the question of feminism old and new. What, if anything, can this translational reading of Bersani do to help us concretely understand the fundamental debate between these two camps?

As a subject formed within the very (academic) power structures that I (ambivalently) wish to oppose – all irony intended – I can only begin to answer this question by returning to the scene of theory. A recent series of lectures given by Judith Butler at the University of Chicago was organized under the title 'Ethical Violence: Suspending Judgment'. The first talk, 'Critique as Virtue: Foucault and the Limits of Intelligibility', set out to establish the implications of critique, not only as philosophy, but as practice and poesis (and as the practice of poesis and the poesis of practice … but let us for the moment leave such asides aside). What emerged from Butler's (Derridean) reading of Foucault was a model of critique which aimed to take radical risks with the very boundaries of what is, at any given time, knowable/intelligible as the sign of the human. Much like Bersani's exhortation to abscond from relationality in order to create (or at least adumbrate) hitherto unforeseen and unforeseeable communities, Butler sought to illuminate the ways in which one (i.e. a subject) might risk intelligibility in order to force social space to confront its constitutive foreclosures.

While listening to Butler speak I was both excited and troubled. Excited because, after all, what else is good thought but that which undoes the surface, risking censure? Who, in today's age, wants merely to lend their thought to party doctrine? Troubled because I wondered if this sense of critique did not in effect reinstate a romantic image of the brilliant thinker who acts in isolation from collective social movements. If critique aims radically to undo the norms which constrain fields of possibility – if critique functions as a meta-norm which norms any given set of norms (with the caveat that critique's status as meta-norm does not imply that it is not itself immanent to the workings of power) – could we ever have a truly critical community of critique? In other words, if a *group* of people opted to take risks with the intelligible, wouldn't the fact that a sort of mini-community was involved merely reinstate a new set of norms, and thus new constraints on intelligibility? Does the very nature of critique as that which risks the intelligible overvalue the indi-

vidual – that is, does it instantiate the individual as the ultimate horizon of ethicality?

Perhaps it is this seeming impossibility of a critical *community* (and by this I mean not only a broader community of critique but, more importantly, a critique which aims at transformed social space rather than transformed subjectivity) that some 'old-style' feminists – at their best – find troubling about Judith Butler and new feminism at large. In this context, what my detour through Bersani has meant to argue is that it is possible to imagine critique that is not just about the critic as singular subject (or singular institutional position), critique whose ultimate political horizon is the *bringing into being* of ontologically intersubjective *modes of being*, thereby opposing itself to the opposition between social space and subjectivity.

Notes

I wish to thank Arnold Davidson, who devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to commenting on this article. Thanks also to Linda Augustyn, Sharmila Roy, Jay Williams and Sharif Youssef for their criticisms and suggestions.

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p. 215.
2. For the rest of this section, I am making use of Martha Nussbaum's critique of Judith Butler. The background which structures this critique is a broad generational rift between what Nussbaum calls 'old-style committed feminism', and a new 'feminism of a symbolic type', and Nussbaum makes both herself and Butler into transparent signs referring to these respective positions. This critique was published in the *New Republic*, a magazine that concerns itself with intellectual life only in those moments when it sees the academy as undergoing profound changes. Nussbaum's criticism prompted a wave of angry responses from prominent 'new feminists' (acting, ironically enough, in group solidarity) who (at least minimally) support Butler. See Martha Nussbaum, 'The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler', *New Republic*, 22 February 1999, available from www.thenewrepublic.com/archive/0299/022299/nussbaum 022299.html; accessed on 3 December 2000. For responses by Gayatri Spivak, Drucilla Cornell, Joan Scott and others, see www.tnr.com/archive/0499/041999/nussbaum041999.html; accessed on 3 December 2000. For a more strictly academic debate in the same ilk, see Susan Gubar, 'What Ails Feminist Criticism?' *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 4, Summer 1998, pp. 878–902; and the response by Robyn Wiegman, 'What Ails Feminist Criticism? A Second Opinion', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 2, Winter 1999, pp. 362–79. For an account of the contemporary history of such debates, see Beatrice Hanssen, 'Whatever Happened to Feminist Theory?', in Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka, eds, *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2001, pp. 58–98.
3. Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations', in Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds, *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Routledge, New York, 1992, p. 16.
4. For example, Nussbaum places Butler's 'self-involved feminism' in the context of the 'great tragedy in the new feminist theory in America … the loss of a sense of public commitment'. She goes on to claim that 'in this sense, Butler's self-involved feminism is extremely American' ('The Professor of Parody', p. 7).
5. Bersani cannot unambivalently be read as a model of new feminism. However, he can be used as an example of the fact that the old feminists' reading of the new is incomplete and reductive at best. Some will surely exclaim, 'But Bersani is in no way a feminist!' I hope to show not only that Bersani's work is important for feminist projects but also that he shares many of the same concerns as those working more strictly within 'feminist thought'.
6. I will not discuss Bersani's celebrated essay 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' in any significant detail here. However, reading Bersani in terms of solipsism versus collectivity, one could make the argument that 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' marks a point conceptually between the emphasis on the self found in *The Freudian Body* and the promise of collectivity in *Homos*.
7. Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, pp. 38–40.
8. Mandy Merck, 'Savage Nights', in Mandy Merck, Naomi Segal and Elizabeth Wright, eds, *Coming Out of Feminism?*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998, p. 216.
9. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 60.
10. Ibid., emphasis added.
11. Though this raises the question of whether the Lacanian account of a particular kind of Symbolic shattering properly makes room for the ethical moment. On this matter see Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity*, Verso, London, 1999, pp. 183–216; and Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, Verso, London, 2001, pp. 141–89.
12. Of course, Laplanche is mentioned quite often in *The Freudian Body*. But what that work emphasizes is the Laplanchian discussion of *ébranlement*, not the radically intersubjective nature of the Laplanchian psychic subject, i.e. the fact that sexuality is a kind of shattering, but not that it is always some Other who shatters me. Paradoxically, the criticism that I put here to the early Bersani comes very close to what the late Bersani finds problematic in the work of many psychoanalytic theorists, including Laplanche. For instance, in 'Sociality and Sexuality' Bersani writes that the Laplanchian account of the birth of relationality

    > can, in the final analysis, only be about me … Intersubjectivity in the psychoanalytic accounts … is a drama of property relations. The world dispossesses me of myself; it threatens or steals the being that is properly mine, that is my property. The … Laplanchian … imaginary subject must master the world in order to repossess its self.

    Speaking more generally on psychoanalysis, Bersani writes:

    > Psychoanalysis has psychoanalyzed the subject's need to master otherness, and, in so doing, it has exposed that need as the inescapable consequence of the equally inescapable dysfunctionality in the human subject's efforts to negotiate the world's difference.

    See Leo Bersani, 'Sociality and Sexuality', *Critical In-*

quiry, vol. 26, no. 4, Summer 2000, pp. 647, 645, 648.
13. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 39.
14. Ibid., p. 92.
15. Jonathan Dollimore, 'Sex and Death', *Textual Practice*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1995, p. 37.
16. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, pp. 9, 11.
17. Ibid., p. 25.
18. Ibid., p. 41.
19. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1996, p. 92.
20. I (try to) use the term 'aporia' in the rich sense that Gayatri Spivak brings to the term when she writes: 'Aporias are known in the experience of being passed through, although they are non-passages; they are thus disclosed in effacement, thus experience of the impossible.' (See Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p. 427.)
21. See Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, 'Sadism and Film: Freud and Resnais', *Qui Parle*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1992, pp. 14–15.
22. Ibid., pp. 14, 15.
23. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 70.
24. Perhaps, though, this is incorrect, for Bersani's discussion of 'the psychic dislocation of mobile desire' seems to have some affinity with the Lacanian notion of symbolic castration, which, in so far as I understand it, is precisely the moment at which one is allowed to enter the social world.
25. H.N. Lukes, 'Is the Rectum *das Ding*? Lacan, Bersani and the Ethics of Perversion', in 'Beyond Redemption: The Work of Leo Bersani', *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 20, nos 1–2, 1998, p. 110.
26. On this matter, see Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp. 45–70; and, of course, Emmanuel Levinas, 'Substitution', in Sean Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 88–125.
27. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 114.
28. Leo Bersani, *Homos*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1995, pp. 4–5.
29. Tim Dean, 'Sex and Syncope', *Raritan*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1996, p. 77.
30. Bersani, *Homos*, p. 5.
31. Ibid., pp. 5, 51.
32. Ibid., pp. 5–6. Butler makes a similar argument when she writes, 'It might be wise to consider the political consequences of keeping in their place the very premises that have tried to secure our subordination from the start.' ('Contingent Foundations', p. 19.)
33. Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1988, p. 214.
34. Bersani, *Homos*, pp. 172, 122, 153.
35. Ibid., pp. 122, 153.
36. Ibid., p. 123.
37. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 1997, p. 81.
38. Bersani, *Homos*, p. 123.
39. Ibid., p.124.
40. Ibid., pp. 128–34, 165.
41. Ibid., p. 128, emphasis added.
42. Ibid., pp. 129, 140–41, 168–71.
43. Ibid., p. 129.
44. Ibid., p. 125.
45. Ibid., p. 131.
46. Ibid., p. 128.
47. I borrow the term 'enabling fiction' from Judith Butler's work on Hegel's discursive strategies. See Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, 2nd edn, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, pp. 1–24.
48. Nussbaum, 'The Professor of Parody', p. 8.
49. I take the distinction that Deleuze and Guattari draw between the 'molecular' and the 'molar' to be similar to the micro/macro distinction, though the molecular and the molar are certainly not synonyms for the micro and the macro. Operating with a provisional equation of these two sets of concepts, what I invoke in this article is Deleuze and Guattari's comment that the molecular is not 'any less coextensive with the entire social field than the molar organization.' (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 215.)
50. Mobilizing a decidedly non-Deleuzian vocabulary, Jean-Luc Nancy makes a similar point in his beautiful essay 'La Communauté Désœuvrée.' While writing this article, I have struggled with Nancy's injunction to conceive of the community as something other than a simple collection of singular subjects. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, pp. 1–42.