

CLONES AND BREEDERS: An Introduction to Queer Sameness

mikko tuhkanen

For the past decades, much of academia's critical and political energies has been invested in analyses of differences. While, institutionally, feminism has had the most profound impact in inducing the reflex of difference in our critical projects, differences have to an equal extent attracted those of us working in the fields of lesbian and gay, queer, critical race, and post-colonial studies. We have hoped that this insistence on differences would enable us to read privileged positions' passing as universals, to insert minoritarian voices into hegemony's monologue, and to induce the potentially endless, uncontainable production of otherness.

Yet, as we have begun to realize, such an intellectual and political project is not without its dangers. One may not easily be able to distinguish the proliferation of differences from the kind of disciplinary productivity that Michel Foucault points to as one of the most ingenious, and inherent, strategies by which resistance from its very inception is neutralized by – in fact synonymous with – power. We can see this danger of absorption when, in our politics, differences begin to coalesce as monadic entities, as participants in seemingly neutral dialogues.



As an example of such anodyne, domesticated difference, we can point to multiculturalism, which, arguably, merely bolsters the very categories whose symptoms it seeks to alleviate.

Even though to subsume all critical thinking of difference under this scenario would be in bad faith, there may be good reasons at this historical point to be suspicious about difference. By now our insistence on it may have congealed into a habitual response to the difficulty of thinking that prevents the emergence of new productive possibilities. It is with this in mind that we propose to address the issue of *sameness*, welcoming what Adrian Rifkin calls its “conceptual absurdity.” At this inaugural point one must ask: what distinguishes sameness from any number of previous objects of academic consumption, which feeds on an ever-expanding field of difference? Peggy Phelan, in her contribution to our issue, articulates a suspicion that inevitably adheres to our project: How can one approach sameness except as the cutting-edge, trendiest version of difference? What makes sameness different from difference? What, in the end, prevents it from being a new, appropriable term whose emergence marks at worst merely a stage in the epistemological mapping of otherness?

The difficulty of these questions is such that we may want to suspend the interrogation and be content, for now, to merely open the question of sameness as, precisely, a question. On the strength of our contributors’ work, it seems that sameness may be less a move away from difference than a productive return to it – that is, a return to (but without necessarily supposing a previous encounter with) something Gilles Deleuze calls “difference in itself.” Sameness, we maintain, names an effort to

think of what difference has been trying to get at but what has often been reduced to a kind of careless consumerism of otherness. Specifically in psychoanalysis, it may necessitate a rethinking of certain homophobic claims that, as James Penney shows, the emphasis on difference has allowed.

It seems that queer theory is a breeding ground for such an investigation. In its gravitation to the most abjected areas of culture – an aspect that horrifies its critics, gay and straight alike – queer theory is particularly welcoming to such a concept. Queer forces a break with tradition by grounding itself in the most negatively valued realms of philosophy and politics. Within this logic, sameness emerges as an almost obvious concept for queer theory to address, for homosexuality has often figured as excessive sameness, as the compulsive, unproductive repetitions of narcissism. Sameness here points to the appeal of a communication without the differentiating third term (in psychoanalytic terms, the Name of the Father) – a lack that gives such communication the destructive trajectory of the Nirvana principle. As Judith Roof notes, the lack of a mediating term in queer sexuality seemingly allows the lethal appeal of infusion and sameness – that is, the death drive – to proceed unfettered.

With my reference to *Nirwanaprinzip* (or what in the early “Project for a Scientific Psychology” Freud calls the principle of inertia [*Trägheitsprinzip*]), rather than to the more familiar principle of constancy (*Konstanzprinzip*), I wish to allude to the well-known contradictions in psychoanalytic thinking of the death drive. To summarize, with the principle of constancy Freud tries to rescue drives from

being absorbed to the death drive – an absorption to which the Nirvana principle or the principle of inertia logically leads. Following Leo Bersani’s work, at least up until *Homos*, we can suggest that homosexuality lays bare the death drive that is domesticated, or bound, in heterosexuality’s narrative trajectory. (Indeed, in Bersani’s texts – including the essay herein – one finds an evolving interrogation of the concept of sameness, albeit mostly in an implicit form and under such various names as impersonal narcissism, radical passivity, inaccurate replication, and homo-ness.) Analogically, we can suggest that, through its focus on sameness, queer theory aims at an unbinding (*Entbindung*) of the prophylactic narrative of difference. In Lacanese, queer thinking’s constitutive drive leads beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the symbolized realm. Given Lacan’s observation that “all drives are death drives,” we can continue the analogy by suggesting that queer as an intellectual and political project merely makes explicit what is constitutive of, but simultaneously most unsustainable about, thinking itself.

Of course, the specter of sameness has been raised not only against queers: as an appellation for straight folk, the fag slang term *breeders* denotes the brainless, mechanical, and (in Foucault’s term) docile reproduction of the same whose dystopic extreme one can see in sci-fi films from *The Stepford Wives* to *The Matrix*.¹ Thus, if sameness confronts us as a strangely threatening and coercive concept with eugenic overtones, in this issue we propose a queer (re)turn to these toxic areas of cultural production, as opposed to the by-now anodyne remedies of difference. One can suggest, with Tim Dean, that the phobogenic

aspects of gay culture may best be exemplified by the *clones* of the 1970s, whose hypermasculine uniformity disturbingly advertises the contagiousness of homosexual sameness. Clones, who “prized the surface of desirable sameness over the depths of humanist subjectivity,”² represent what Guy Hocquenghem observes of homophobic anxieties: “Homosexual desire is the ungenerating-ungenerated terror of the family, because it produces itself without reproducing. Every homosexual must thus see himself as the end of the species, the termination of a process for which he is not responsible and which must stop at himself.... The homosexual can only be a degenerate, for he does not generate.” Yet, three paragraphs later, he writes that “[h]omosexual production takes place according to a mode of non-limitative horizontal relations, heterosexual reproduction according to one of hierarchical succession.”³ Within the space of these passages, Hocquenghem points to a strange contradiction at the heart of homophobia: homosexuality is at once com-



pletely barren *and* intensely fecund; it signals the dying out of the race *and* a generation of unforeseen hybridities. Foucault followed Hocquenghem in the early 1980s in connecting homosexuality to such production of new, “still improbable” possibilities.⁴ As I suggest in my contribution to this issue, Bersani continues this trajectory in positing *sameness as a form of*

becoming in his most recent work.

According to this paradoxical dynamic, sameness emerges as the unforeseen. We hope that this question — ultimately, a political question of the new — is opened by the focus on sameness, as much as gay *askesis* offered for Foucault a *techne* with “a possibility for creative life,” “a state of becoming.”⁵

1. This suggests that homosexuality or queerness has no inherent claim to sameness but materializes it at this historical moment. If queer is not endowed with a transhistorically subversive potential — as Graham L. Hammill notes, criticizing Judith Butler’s work — neither should one posit sameness any ontological value. Christopher Lane’s questioning of the productivity of sameness for queer thought usefully underlines the ongoing problems in locating the *political* in queer politics.
2. Richard Meyer, “Warhol’s Clones,” in *Negotiating Lesbian and Gay Subjects*, ed. Monica Dorenkamp and Richard Henke (New York: Routledge, 1995), 110.
3. Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 107, 109.
4. Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” trans. John Johnston, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 137.
5. Foucault, “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” in *Essential Works*, vol. 1, 163; Foucault, “History and Homosexuality,” trans. John Johnston, in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext[e], 1996), 370.