

SAMENESS WITHOUT IDENTITY

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There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all...[W]hat is philosophy today — philosophical activity, I mean — if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?

— Michel Foucault¹

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

This passage, from Foucault's introduction to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, captures exactly what contemporary criticism values about difference. To think differently is to think beyond or against the status quo; the political significance of philosophy consists in its thinking otherwise, its refusing to authorize the "already known," and thus its functioning as something other than a discourse of legitimation or conservation. According to this logic, critical thinking cannot hope to solve the crises of legitimation that characterize modernity, but instead must intensify them by persistently questioning that which is "already known." Philosophical activity assumes its political dimension by functioning at certain historical moments, certain "times in life," as an avant garde. At such moments the challenge lies in resisting the lures of self-authorization and self-consolidation; it is a question not of developing but of changing, of "dispers[ing] one toward a strange and new relation with himself," as Foucault puts it in his original preface to *The Use of Pleasure*.² With the practice of thinking differently comes the promise — or, depending on one's point of view, the threat — of change.

In the passage above Foucault is explaining why the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality* appear so discontinuous with the first. During the course of establishing how individuals recognize themselves as subjects of something called sexuality, Foucault found it necessary to return to the more basic question of how individuals come

to recognize themselves as subjects in the first place; hence his decision to “reorganize the whole study around the slow formation, in antiquity, of a hermeneutics of the self.”³ What draws Foucault to the period of antiquity is the disjunction between its techniques of the self and our hermeneutics of desire — the fact that for the Greeks one exercises an elaborate relation to himself without concern for deciphering one’s own truth, much less tending to locate that truth specifically in desire. Another way of putting this would be to say that while in his introductory volume of *The History of Sexuality* Foucault attempts to think sexuality outside the framework of psychoanalysis (which he tacitly identifies with the repressive hypothesis), in subsequent volumes he commits himself to the more basic project of trying to think *subjectivity* non-psychoanalytically. Or, more accurately yet, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* represent Foucault’s most sustained attempts to think subjectivity apart from psychology; and in so doing he refused to countenance psychoanalytic antipsychologism as a viable method for this project.

Thus in “thinking differently” Foucault is doing two things at once. First, he is measuring his distance from conceptualizations of subjectivity and sexuality that, at the time of his writing the preface, had dominated the Parisian intellectual landscape since the 1950s. Lacan remains central to the status quo against which Foucault is thinking, because from the latter’s perspective psychoanalysis represents the “already known,” the taken-for-granted paradigm of subjectification. No doubt this positioning of psychoanalysis involves misrecognizing what Lacan was doing, as suggested by Foucault’s reductive critique of the concept of repression. More significantly, however, in “thinking differently” Foucault is measuring the distance from his own conceptualizations of subjectivity and sexuality too. The “already known” that the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* refuse to legitimate should be understood as encompassing the first volume. Thinking differently entails being deliberately discontinuous with oneself. And this discontinuity involves more than simply changing one’s mind or backtracking; it is a matter not of self-contradiction but of becoming other than what one was.

The species of self-transformation that Foucault describes in the course of rationalizing his attempt to “think differently” in the second and third volumes also constitutes his object of analysis in those works. According to his account, Greek “arts of existence” consist not in discovering or realizing one’s subjective identity, but in departing from it. Thus in taking the occasion to anatomize ancient techniques of the self that exhibit little preoccupation with identity, Foucault departs from his own intellectual identity and its itinerary, to such an extent that publishing conventions necessitate some explanation of the evident discontinuity. Yet in this resistance to identity we can discern a larger continuity structuring Foucault’s entire *oeuvre*, namely, his ongoing commitment to the critique of identity as a classificatory mechanism indispensable to regimes of normalization. Since for Foucault identities represent forms of imprisonment, it makes sense that he would resist those classifications through which we identify

and position intellectuals and their work too. The most basic way of thinking differently is thus to think against identity, particularly one's own.

Thinking differently counts as political activity because it promises a kind of freedom: "The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently."⁴ Here the phrase "one's own history" refers to both the history of one's epoch and one's own specific trajectory within that context. The possibility of liberating thought "from what it silently thinks" suggests achieving some distance from unspoken assumptions — one's own as well as those of others. But the idea of a form of thinking that operates silently within thought itself conjures the specter of something akin to the unconscious; indeed, it is not difficult to read Foucault's sentence as an allegory of psychoanalysis: *the object is to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently*. Psychoanalysis, too, represents a practice of self-transformation, of becoming other to oneself by doing substantially more than merely switching self-identifications. From this vantage point, to think differently would be to think psychoanalytically, even if in certain contexts that entailed thinking against psychoanalytic orthodoxy or counter psychoanalytic institutionalization.

In making this argument, I do not wish to assimilate Foucault to Lacan, or to nullify the former's critique of psychoanalysis. Rather, I am interested in how, for both Foucault and Lacan, thinking seems antithetical to identity — how, that is, "thinking differently" may be considered a redundancy, insofar as thinking entails introducing a difference to what otherwise appears seamlessly self-identical. As Lacan put it in one of his many revisions of the Cartesian formula, "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think."⁵ For both Lacan and Foucault (albeit differently), *thinking ruptures identity*. Within a psychoanalytic framework, thinking ruptures identity because there can be no thinking, no movement of consciousness, that is not divided by the unconscious. When we regard the unconscious as an effect of language, we grasp how the linguistic sign's division between signifier and signified renders impossible any psychological identity that would remain untroubled by slippage. Lacan thus establishes psychoanalysis on an antipsychologistic basis, rejecting psychology as a science of identities.

It is not only psychological presuppositions that are challenged by this basic psychoanalytic move, but also philosophical and sociological conceptions of identity. We should not forget that philosophy, psychology, and sociology all employ different senses of the term: while for psychology *identity* designates a self-conscious sense of selfhood, for philosophy the term refers to a non-psychological principle of unity or indiscernibility; sociologically *identity* betokens social categories of classification — for instance, those of gender, race, and sexuality — that variably inform an individual's psychological identity while remaining irreducible to it. I note these extremely schematic distinctions merely to observe that critiques of identitarianism often draw

inconsistently on discourses of identity (for example, by using a philosophical sense of non-identity to try to undermine oppressive social identities), and that Lacan's account of subjective division, while it carries far-reaching implications for all these discourses, rarely employs the term *identity*.⁶

If thinking ruptures identity, then we must entertain the possibility that in this formula the term *thinking* might be substituted with *deconstruction* — deconstruction ruptures identity — insofar as the latter has shown how every identity is fissured from within by differences that are not merely contingent upon, but rather constitutive of, identity. Jacques Derrida's early neologism *différance* articulates this principle, suggesting how writing ceaselessly betrays the semantic identities that it is supposed to secure.⁷ While attributing disruptions of identity specifically to writing, Derrida also aligns the differential and deferring properties of inscription with the Freudian unconscious, arguing famously that “writing is unthinkable without repression.”⁸ Drawing on Freud's model of the psychical apparatus as a “mystic writing-pad,” Derrida contends that writing cannot be conceptualized apart from a self-division or internal difference that is identifiable with the unconscious. In pursuing this line of thought he is, of course, mounting a tacit critique of Lacan's account of the unconscious as an effect of *spoken* discourse. My purpose in recalling these old debates, however, is not to negotiate Derrida's complex and ongoing engagement with psychoanalysis, but rather to emphasize how for several decades the critical avant garde has been inseparable from a multivalent critique of identitarianism, whose implications we still are in the midst of assessing. Whether in psychoanalytic, deconstructive, or historicist guise, critiques of identity politics have found in the concept of difference a powerfully unsettling critical tool.

If poststructuralism may be distinguished by its focus on the disruptive effects of internal difference, then the political consequences of such disruption have been exploited most avidly by various minoritarian schools of thought, in which attention to internal differences fruitfully complicates analyses of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and postcoloniality. As a critique of sexual identitarianism, queer theory emerges from this nexus, based philosophically on Foucault's genealogy of sexual classifications in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Unlike Foucault, however, queer theorists have expressed considerable ambivalence about “the loss of specificity” attendant upon a rigorous dismantling of sexual identity categories. The danger is that demonstrating the historical contingency of identity categories and thereby evacuating their contents will cancel the hard-won recognition of differences and reinstate a universal norm, with disastrous political consequences for those whose identities are defined by their distance from the norm.

Anxiety over “specificity” in queer theory thus takes the following form. Foucault has shown how the category of homosexuality emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century as an

instrument of regulatory power that was designed to identify, isolate, and control those whose erotic behavior failed to conform to a certain reproductive ideal associated with capitalism. Homosexuality's becoming an identity, a new kind of pathological selfhood, forms part of the larger process of differentiation that constrains human life by binding us to any number of psychological classifications. As a result sexual identities — no matter how ostensibly liberatory — come to be understood as problems rather than solutions. Or, rather, liberatory sexual identities, such as the categories lesbian and gay, become necessary only in response to severely pathologizing identitarian classifications. The process of differentiation that enabled homosexuality to emerge as a quasi-permanent difference from heterosexuality — and thus ultimately to challenge the latter's normative universality — remains contaminated by the regulatory intentions that inspired differentiation in the first place.

Once seen from this perspective, the political potential of proliferating erotic identities appears distinctly limited. Yet the counter-response to these problems of differentiation — for which the term *queer* has come to stand in the field of erotic politics — risks returning sexual minorities to the invisibility they suffered before sex and gender universals were challenged. In short, critiques of identitarianism provoke the fear, for both individuals and groups, that too much will be lost if identity is lost. Minoritarianism cannot survive a full-scale assault on identity politics, a fact that helps explain the ambivalence surrounding anti-identitarianism. There are limits to how far a complete dismantling of identity categories can be sustained, in part because the structures of imaginary recognition through which we make sense of ourselves depend on these categories. Without some baseline minimum of identity, the ego dissolves. And hence too much internal difference tends to be experienced as intolerable.

We thus encounter two related problems: first, that the introduction of differences can undermine identity categories to the point of disabling incoherence; but second, and conversely, that difference always threatens to re-establish itself as identity and thereby to generate a new status quo, which inhibits recognition of further differences. Bisexuality provides a good example of this Janus-faced conundrum, in that most lesbian and gay thinking tends to regard full acknowledgment of bisexuality as dangerously compromising to gay politics, whereas most bisexual thinking feels marginalized by the hegemony that lesbian and gay identities assume beyond the ambit of normative heterosexuality. If one is bisexual, gayness or lesbianism can seem like the status quo that one is struggling against, quite as much as heteronormativity.⁹ When difference coalesces into identity — when it becomes reified or essentialized — one is no longer “thinking differently” in the way that Foucault describes. Instead, once difference congeals into identity, one ends up thinking against the other rather than against oneself — and this is infinitely easier to do. Thus difference rapidly appears as an external problem, a question of the boundary between oneself and others, rather than figuring an internal inconsistency that renders one other to him- or herself.

Another way of framing this problem would involve pointing out that the relation between identity and difference tends to be conceived in imaginary or binary terms, such that difference effectively denotes merely a *different identity*. To forestall this recentering of difference as identity, a third term that remains inassimilable to either pole of the binary, while also refusing to function as a compromise between them, is needed. Elsewhere I have argued that Lacan's distinguishing among registers of alterity offers one way of thinking the identity-difference relation in non-imaginary terms, since the otherness of language remains irreducible to social differentials. That is to say, Lacan's theory of the symbolic order maintains a distinction between otherness and difference that is both conceptually and ethically beneficial.¹⁰ Linguistic alterity functions as a third term mediating different identities or subject positions in such a way that no identity can claim to be unfractured; no subject position can achieve complete self-identity once language is taken into account. Derridean *différance* functions in approximately this way too, as an unregulatable force of differentiation that perpetually prevents the recentering of difference as identity. It is by employing versions of this logic that poststructuralist queer theorists, such as Judith Butler and Lee Edelman, critique the assumption of sexed and gendered identities.¹¹

The poststructuralist emphasis on difference has often led to a collapsing of otherness with difference, and thus to a neglect of the specificity not so much of social differentials as of linguistic alterity. But even when the specificity of representational mediation is observed scrupulously, the doubleness of this mediating alterity tends to go overlooked. By this I mean that identity is troubled not only by the fissuring of linguistic alterity, but also by what language misses. To put this in explicitly Lacanian terms: subjective identities are compromised by both symbolic and real axes of mediation. The language through which we express and thereby create ourselves fractures selfhood doubly, since it not only proliferates signification beyond our control, but also fails to signify completely in spite of its generativity. Lacan calls linguistic excess *the unconscious*; linguistic deficiency he calls *the real*. The pertinence of the Lacanian real lies less in its undermining of identity than in its sabotaging of difference. That is to say, the real represents a zone of undifferentiation — a place where difference cannot exist — because it is devoid of signifiers; the real is defined negatively as nothing other than this void. If it betokens a logical space that is equally inhospitable to difference and identity, then perhaps the Lacanian real could be conceived in terms of sameness — a sameness that is distinct from, indeed resistant to, identity.

Generally conceived in terms of its resistance to meaning, the real has been aligned most commonly with trauma and hence with what hurts. This emphasis was necessary in part as a corrective to facile appropriations of French psychoanalysis that perceived in the category of jouissance a liberatory pleasure conveniently separable from the difficulties attendant upon psychic negativity. Yet as an instance of the failure of imaginary and symbolic differentiations,

the real may be aligned hypothetically with ontological sameness — and thus thought apart from the primarily negative dimension of trauma, impossibility, and pain. To “think differently” at this juncture in the history of psychoanalysis may be, paradoxically, to think more about sameness than about difference, to become temporarily indifferent to difference, and to resist assimilating sameness too readily to the imaginary register. While I do not wish to attribute to psychoanalytic discourses of sexual difference all the problems of identitarianism, thinking sameness may entail bracketing or demoting sexual difference as an explanatory category. Thus it would be less a question of supplementing the analytic paradigm of sexual difference with consideration of racial difference or postcolonial difference (to invoke two of the directions pursued recently in psychoanalytic studies) than of thinking in an entirely different register — that of undifferentiation. Rather than multiplying differences and discriminating ever finer particularities, we might suspend temporarily the differentiation machine in order to consider forms of existence for which the distinction between identity and difference is largely irrelevant.

While queer theory emerged as part of the ongoing pluralist project of “difference studies,” it has a stake in resisting the sexual differentiations of modernity. Critical emphasis on sexual difference, valuable though it has been, tends to reinforce heteronormativity by tying erotic relationality too closely to differences between the sexes. As I have argued elsewhere, the psychoanalytic preoccupation with sexual difference often leads to an elision of otherness with difference, such that one’s subjective relations to alterity get figured primarily in terms of relations with “the Other sex.”¹² Consequently queer theory stands to gain from investigating how non-imaginary sexual sameness — a sameness irreducible to identity — may represent more than merely the mythic prehistory or default of sexual difference.

But perhaps it is misleading to speak in terms of *sexual* sameness, as if the category of sexuality — or, indeed, any category — could still signify meaningfully at the level of ontological undifferentiation that concerns us here. It may be more accurate to hypothesize instead that the sexual grants access to states or relations that dissolve the already troubled distinction between sexual and non-sexual. Certainly it is the case phenomenologically that relations of apparent sameness in homosexuality adumbrate some possibilities for the de-differentiating imagination. For example, Leo Bersani’s recent work suggests that the sameness of gender in homosexuality points toward an ontological solidarity of being that makes the ostensible failure of difference ethically exemplary. Rather than betraying a disavowal of difference or a narcissistic immaturity (as some psychoanalytically inspired homophobes have claimed), homosexuality would lay bare, as it were, the relational potential of dissolving the boundaries between oneself and others, or of apprehending those boundaries as illusory. From this perspective the gay clone appears less as a model of stifling conformism than as an allegorical figure of what Bersani calls “inaccurate self-replication.” The idea is not that we should start trying to look alike after all, or should

aspire to a single gendered ideal, but rather that the critique of queer culture's manifestations of sameness may be missing something that a notion of the erotic "clone" makes visible. The critique of the clone — that it perpetuates an exclusionary ideal of masculinity — comes from the gay left as well as the antigay right: whereas the latter sees in sameness a narcissistic disavowal of difference, the former often regards the clone's idealization of butch, self-sufficient masculinity as a racist, misogynist, and ultimately homophobic formation. Apart from the arousal he stimulates in many gay men, surely there is nothing good to be said for this figure?

CLONES

In order to distinguish cultural manifestations of sameness from the ontological de-differentiation that interests Bersani, it may be helpful to meditate further on the gay clone. The term refers to a post-Stonewall norm of masculinity, a particular "look" adopted in the 1970s primarily by American gay men, at a historical moment when it seemed newly possible to embrace gay and masculine identities simultaneously.¹³ Before Stonewall, being openly gay usually meant being flamboyant (conforming to the model of gender inversion), whereas sexual liberation ostensibly disentangled gender from sexuality, such that one could conform to normative gender expectations while nevertheless acknowledging one's non-normative sexual identity. To put it in vernacular terms, after Stonewall the macho gay man and the lesbian femme came to supplement the nelly queen and the butch dyke as more readily available identities for non-heterosexual men and women. In this context the gay clone appropriated the insignia of American westernism — faded denim, flannel shirts, leather boots, often a bandanna, and the *de rigueur* mustache — to affect a look of rugged masculine individualism: think the Marlboro Man or, in its campier version, the Village People. It seemed ironically fitting that the model photographed in the 1970s as the Marlboro Man, that icon of American masculinity, happened to be gay.

Gay men adopted with such alacrity the visual styles of normative masculinity — and, increasingly, hypermasculinity — that it made perfect sense to speak of the clone look. While the term connotes a critique of gender homogenization — we endured the struggles of sexual liberation so that all gay men could try to look alike? — more often than not the clone functioned as an index of desirability, even for those who employed the term disparagingly. When discussing the clone's commitment to masculinity, Foucault connected his recent cultural emergence to the significance of "monosexual relations," remarking on the lack of precedence for sexual intimacy between two adult men (rather than between an older man and a youth) outside the context of single-sex institutions such as prisons and the military.¹⁴ Here I am not interested in either praising the gay clone as subversive of sex-gender hierarchies or blaming him as conformist; neither am I especially concerned with what made this image so potent an erotic stimulant in the first place.

Rather, I'm interested in how the clone has mutated in gay culture — how he has replicated inaccurately, we might say — and, ultimately, how the desire for sameness, or what Foucault speaks of in terms of monosexuality, may represent more than a stubborn refusal to move beyond the securities of the imaginary into the grown-up world of difference.

Of course, the term *clone* was always hyperbolic in gay culture, since no two persons can be visually identical unless they happen to be twins (and in that case the appearance of identity must be carefully cultivated if visual indistinguishability is to be sustained into adulthood). Rather than signaling visual identity, then, the clone signified a shared erotic ideal — albeit one that was subject to endlessly proliferating differentiations as gay men discovered they were each looking for something quite specific in bed. When we get down to the nitty gritty, a collective erotic ideal rapidly disintegrates into divergent preferences that vastly exceed any binary system yet devised. It is not just that desire divides along hetero- and homo- lines, but also that within each category numerous subcategories proliferate, in a manner that spurs the taxonomic imagination to redouble its classificatory efforts.

Perhaps as a result of experiencing the negative effects of erotic classification, gay men have become particularly adept at elaborating complex sexual typologies — a project in which the clone's sartorial accessories were enlisted without hesitation. I refer here to the gay “hanky code,” a signifying system whereby differently colored bandannas signal the specific erotic activity one is pursuing. The hanky code is sufficiently complicated to warrant some explaining — even to rather experienced gay men. Worn on the left-hand side, a bandanna generally indicates that the wearer wishes to assume a dominant position during sex; worn on the right, it indicates the wearer's desire to be dominated. However, even if one were content to remain positionally consistent and therefore in some sense *non*-promiscuous during a given erotic encounter, the array of bandanna hues is so variegated as to induce vertigo. A card I carry in my wallet lists no less than 59 different bandanna colors, each of which subdivides into two meanings depending on whether it is worn left or right. To ensure that one is getting what one is looking for, he must be able to distinguish, often under dim lighting, light blue from robin's egg blue from medium blue from navy blue from teal blue — and be able to tell left from right consistently, a faculty not closely correlated with the gay gene.¹⁵ And naturally one needs to be sure of what one is looking for in the first place. Needless to say, gay folklore is as replete with tales of erotic misrecognition as is Shakespearean comedy; despite their carefully choreographed signals, gay men often end up with a surprise once they make it into the bedroom. Paying attention to the gay clone, we thus discover a bewildering multiplicity of erotic differentiation associated with this icon of erstwhile sameness. The taxonomic imagination frequently risks defeat at the hands of its own classificatory zeal. This would be one way of understanding what Foucault meant by his thesis that there is no power without resistance — that obstructions to power come not from some outside force but rather from inside power itself.

While the gay hanky code promotes differentiation based on the kind of erotic activity desired, it also militates against the clone's monopoly on desirability by subdividing potential partners into any number of types. That is to say, the hanky code differentiates not only according to behavior (do you like to fist or to get fisted?), but also according to identity (are you looking for a black lover or a Latino? a cop or a cowboy or a Daddy?). By differentiating along the axis of identity and appearance, as well as along that of activity, gay semiotic systems permit virtually anybody to become a type. You might have considered yourself too nondescript to qualify as a clone (or a cowboy or a leatherman); so much the better for perfecting that "boy next door" look. Haven't set foot inside a gym since high school? All the more likely that you'll qualify as a chubby, drawing the ardent devotion of "chubby chasers," men who prefer their sex partners very overweight (wear an apricot bandanna). Whatever your race, age, or body-type — and whether you're hirsute or smooth, circumcised or not, tattooed or not, bald or not — you will qualify as some stranger's erotic ideal. Increasingly HIV-seropositivity qualifies as an erotic type too.¹⁶ Even the condition of being without observable distinction carries its own distinction: it is considered sexy to be generic, since the generic counts as yet one more erotic type. In the gay world, being unmarked is itself remarkable. Thus while Bersani is right to insist — against those who idealize queer desire as utopianly democratic — on "the ruthlessly exclusionary nature of sexual desire,"¹⁷ nevertheless queer culture offsets desire's exclusionary commitments by its paradoxical diversification of exclusivity.

From a psychoanalytic perspective we could say that if virtually anybody can be seen as a type and therefore as sexually attractive *to someone*, then this is because practically anything can be fetishized. Just as conventionally unappealing acts — defecating, urinating, spitting, hitting — can come to be regarded as erotically stimulating, so too can conventionally unappealing physical traits.¹⁸ Doubtless this fetishistic aptitude compensates for the impossibly demanding ideals of physical beauty that circulate so intensively in gay male culture: once slotted into type, even strikingly unprepossessing men can get as much sex as the most handsome Adonis. We might say that gay men represent the most resolute fetishists, capable of transforming *any* physical attribute or activity into an object of desire. But when we consider Lacan's claim that desire is structurally fetishistic (insofar as its cause is the shape-shifting, multiform *objet petit a*), we see that the gay aptitude for fetishism represents nothing more than an intuitive grasp of the workings of desire *tout court*. In practice if not in theory, North American gay men are mostly Lacanians.

One of the more unlikely hanky codes is the grey flannel bandanna: worn on the right, it signifies "likes men in suits"; worn on the left, "actually owns a suit." This example suggests some kinship between the aptitude for making anything into a sexual fetish and the capacity for regarding any identity as a form of drag — a capacity represented most famously in *Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston's documentary about Harlem drag balls, and theorized most

persistently by Judith Butler. Multiplying fetishistic “types” undermines normative objects of desire in the same way that expanding drag beyond female impersonation undermines essentialized identities. Thus what seems politically appealing about gay fetishism is its potential anti-identitarianism: fixating on one particular trait dissolves the culture’s fixations on normative objects of desire by proliferating the possible activities and sites of eros. Further, in highlighting the partiality of desire’s objects, fetishism throws into relief how human desire originates not in heterosexuality — nor even in the attractiveness of other persons — but in the impersonal operations of language on corporeality. Lacan’s theory of the *objet a* offers an account of how symbolic existence disintegrates human bodies, leaving intangible objects of desire in its wake.

When we characterize *objet a* as Lacan’s principal contribution to the study of fetishism, we see that the psychoanalytic account of objects forms part of what I have designated the differentiating imagination. Perhaps originally psychoanalysis participated in the insidious project of differentiation that I termed taxonomic, namely, the attempt to classify sexual perversions with the aim of curing or at least regulating them. But, as I have suggested, Lacan’s account of the object differentiates and proliferates causes of desire to a point that confounds heteronormativity. As with the psychoanalytic account of the unconscious, the theory of *objet a* counters sexual identitarianism and therefore provides queer critique with potent conceptual ammunition. However, as with Butler’s appropriation of drag for counteridentitarian purposes, difficulties arise as soon as one endeavors to harness these psychically implicated concepts to political agendas. Too often the capacity for differentiation that undermines identity is understood in voluntarist terms, as if it were a matter simply of choosing one’s identities, fetishes, or objects of desire.

Besides the issue of voluntarism, which has sparked such critical animus, there is a further problem here. This problem stems from the assumption that the only viable response to identitarianism or essentialism originates in the differentiating imagination — that, for example, the ostensibly homogenizing figure of the gay clone must be demystified to reveal an agent of diversification. To phrase this problem at its most basic, I would suggest that criticism has been misled in its conviction that difference, rather than sameness, represents the best weapon against identitarian regimes. Instead of deconstructing sameness to reveal the differentiations that constitute and thereby internally fracture it, we might distinguish between registers of sameness in the manner that (following Lacan) I previously argued for distinguishing between registers of otherness. Doubtless there is something paradoxical in attempting to distinguish likenesses, just as there is in Bersani’s call for “an emphasis on the *specifics* of sameness,” which also conjures the perverse prospect of differentiating sameness.¹⁹ Yet the example of the gay clone remains useful in helping us to distinguish imaginary sameness from the ontological de-differentiation that Bersani has been investigating under the rubrics of “homosex” and “inaccurate self-replication.”

Ultimately the clone represents an *image* of sameness, as well as of desirability, and thus a figure for imaginary identity. He makes the image of what one might have and the image of what one might be the same image. The clone is a figure for imaginary identity because, in narrowing the distance between self and other, his appeal is fundamentally narcissistic. Whereas Lacan's account of narcissism emphasizes the subject's alienation in a specular image, the clone seems to promise that one may embrace rather than remain alienated from oneself. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this sounds like claiming that somehow imaginary alienation — and the aggressivity that accompanies it — could be overcome. What a transparent fantasy, that one would surmount one's psychic difficulties through the body of the sexual partner!

Yet what does Lacan's notion of imaginary alienation mean, other than that the subject *mis*recognizes him- or herself through the intermediary of the image of another? The point is that imaginary individuation is a giant mistake, and that we are not separately bounded monads struggling to find our way in the world, but rather profoundly connected beings whose interdependence we repeatedly fail to grasp. Lacan's account of the symbolic order indicates this interdependence, though in a differentiating register. The symbolic cuts through imaginary illusions, dividing us against ourselves and undermining our identities. But the real cuts through the differentiating illusions of the symbolic, reminding us that language cannot totalize the effects it aspires to master. Beyond the symbolic lies a realm about which we can *say* very little without denaturing it. Thus our accounts of what Lacan calls the real are always necessarily fictions of one sort or another. It is a new set of fictions about the real that Bersani has been generating in his recent work, suggesting ways of thinking about relational being beyond our comparatively familiar imaginary and symbolic coordinates.

In books such as *The Freudian Body*, Bersani offered a powerful account of how imaginary identities are disrupted and yet survive — even take a kind of pleasure in — that disruption. Developing Laplanche's notion of *ébranlement*, he described the erotic in terms of “self-shattering” and anatomized the paradoxes of trying to erect a politics on that which defeats the coherent self.²⁰ Albeit from a non-Lacanian vantage point, Bersani was charting the illusoriness of the human ego, and he therefore could be regarded as a fellow traveler with respect to a certain Lacanian project. More recently, however, the focus of his work has shifted from self-shattering to self-extension, or what we might call subjective mobility beyond the confines of the ego. I see a parallel here with Lacan's shift from investigating symbolic disruptions of the imaginary to his later emphasis on real disruptions of the symbolic. Once the illusory carapace of the individuated self is broken, it is only a particular brand of face-to-face intersubjectivity that falters. Without the myth of imaginary differentiation, relationality might not be quite so terrifyingly difficult as intersubjective problems suggest. Bersani's contention is that a happier, less antagonistic relationality is perpetually in process at an ontological level that mostly eludes us. Far from representing a merely occasional occurrence, however, this communication of

being — where the term *communication* is understood more in Bataille’s sense than in Lacan’s — happens all the time, and it is only our jealously guarded imaginary selves that prevent us from registering it more clearly.

Bersani argues that ontological relationality becomes visible in certain artworks and certain manifestations of homosexuality; the question of Caravaggio’s sexuality brings these two dimensions together.²¹ When considering Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s analyses of painting and film, we should bear in mind that — unlike most art critics — they are discussing images in a non-imaginary way and focusing on how images corrode rather than secure identity. In this respect, their art criticism shares something fundamental with the work of more explicitly Lacanian critics such as Parveen Adams, Joan Copjec, and Graham Hammill, all of whom in varying ways analyze images not for their thematization of the real (as Slavoj Žižek does) but for their formal dislocations of imaginary recognition.²² The issue of recognition — how we recognize ourselves as dispersed in the world, and thereby recognize the communication of being as always already having begun — poses a central problem here. What does “recognition” without imaginary identification mean? Is there a non-imaginary form of recognition that would not be susceptible to the vicissitudes of *misrecognition*?

Certainly the term *misrecognition* implies the possibility that, perhaps in a register beyond the ego, a less delusional kind of subjective contact might occur, one in which preoccupations with mastery and possession — of oneself and others — would seem less urgent. If this kind of contact occurs without the rivalry that structures imaginary relations, it must be because boundaries demarcating self from other have dissolved. In this zone of ontological de-differentiation or sameness, it no longer makes any sense to speak of the self. After a certain point, a de-individuated self is no self at all, and I think it promotes misprisions of Bersani’s project to retain vocabularies of selfhood when describing the communication of being. Thus it is less a question of ascertaining how inexact are the “inaccurate self-replications” that Bersani and Dutoit identify, than it is of grasping how selfhood figures only a corner of being — how being comprehends while vastly exceeding the ego, and how therefore our selves are but aberrations within the world’s impersonal ontology.²³

In his effort to account for what draws us to this ontological register, Bersani has developed an oxymoronic model of non-imaginary narcissism, locating in the lures of sameness a rationale for our participation in the communication of being. Reading the psychoanalytic critique of homosexuality against itself, he has argued that gay narcissism — or homoness — represents not a troubling disavowal of difference but an enlightening demonstration of how the distinction between difference and identity dissolves in another ontological register. Thus he hypothesizes how imaginary sameness, as exemplified by the figure of the gay clone, might give way to a non-imaginary world of contact that is so drained of antagonism as to qualify as a space of true

solidarity. Given that the communication of being involves contact without barriers, it is perhaps inevitable that we think about it through metaphors of bodily intimacy. The ontological relatedness of which Bersani speaks offers an unlimited intimacy that most people seek (if they do seek it) through sex. But the problem with sex is that it tends to limit intimacy to other persons, when what is at stake in the communication of being is impersonal relationality — or what Bersani elsewhere calls “our already established at-homeness in the world.”²⁴

The metaphor of worldly at-homeness differs from the more overtly erotic figures through which we might explain the attractions of ontological de-differentiation. Despite its interest in narcissism, psychoanalysis has not been especially helpful in rationalizing this attraction, primarily because it pictures de-differentiation as almost exclusively terrifying or traumatic. Yet there is something tautological in the insistence that what threatens the ego is felt to be threatening; what about those aspects of subjectivity that exceed the ego? Why not view the cultural phenomenon of creating a shared “look” and the related phenomenon of a sexuality based on sameness of gender as but superficial instances of a more profound sameness that de-individuates subjectivity less threateningly than the loss of boundaries usually is understood to imply? Without such an over-developed psychology of selfhood, we might be slower to cast de-differentiation in negative terms. In this respect, both Foucault’s and Lacan’s antipsychologism remains to be exploited.

Doubtless the prospect of treating Foucault and Lacan as companion ethicists of the impersonal raises potential methodological problems concerning the loss of distinctions between significantly different thinkers. Bersani recently has suggested, however, that “distinctions between ideas are perhaps grounded in assumptions of a difference of being between the self and the world.”²⁵ There is always a danger that our carefully elaborated distinctions among thinkers and ideas might be based on — or at least fueled by — imaginary identifications that misrecognize deeper interdependencies. Our commitments to individuation make the identifiability and ownership of ideas a high priority, as if thought respected the imaginary boundaries that we place around persons. Yet if, as I hypothesized earlier, thinking ruptures identity, perhaps thinking ultimately corrodes distinctions in favor of analogies that correspond to analogies among worldly forms. From this perspective, “thinking differently” would conduce to sameness (though not to identity), and thus to an ontological realm at least partly independent of epistemological anxieties — a realm, that is to say, in which thinking would be coterminous with being. Faced with such a prospect we might well ask: What have we got to lose but our selves?

1. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985), 8-9.
2. Foucault, "Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume Two," trans. William Smock, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 205.
3. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 6.
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 166. A couple sentences later, Lacan immediately rewrites this formulation: "I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think." On Lacan's rewriting of Cartesianism, see Mladen Dolar, "Cogito as the Subject of the Unconscious," in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 11-40.
6. Strictly speaking identity is not a psychoanalytic concept, although *identification* is, of course, central to psychoanalytic theory. Devoting his seminar of 1961-62 explicitly to the topic of identification, Lacan is particularly keen to discriminate registers of identification — imaginary, symbolic, and real — and the relations among them. A decade later, in seminars XIX and XX, he approaches this issue through the idea of "the One," meditating on the gnomic formula "*Ya d' l'Un*" — "There's something of the One" — to advance his ongoing critique of identitarianism, in this case with respect to sexual identification, narcissism, and love. See Lacan, *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998).
7. See Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 129-160.
8. Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 226. See also Derrida, "Différance," 149-150.
9. A representative gay political reservation about bisexuality is encapsulated in David M. Halperin's claim that the category of queerness "invites the kind of hostile political manipulation that already is all too familiar to lesbians and gay men from the deployment of the label 'bisexual': it provides a means of de-gaying gayness. Like 'bisexual,' though for different reasons, 'queer' would seem to provide a ready-made instrument of homophobic disavowal: inasmuch as it reconstitutes sexual identity under the sign of the political, it has the capacity to despecify the realities of lesbian and gay oppression, obscuring what is irreducibly *sexual* about those practices and persons most exposed to the effects of sexual racism" (Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 65). Coming from a spokesperson for queer theory, this critique of bisexuality necessarily qualifies the widespread assumption that *queer* betokens an expanded rubric of inclusivity for sexual minorities. Substantial counterarguments to this negative view of bisexuality may be found in Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); and Jonathan Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).
10. See Tim Dean, "Two Kinds of Otherness and Their Consequences," *Critical Inquiry* 23:4 (Summer 1997): 910-920.
11. See Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and the work of Judith Butler, who stages confrontations with the impasses of anti-identitarianism in book after book.
12. Dean, "Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness," in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 120-143.

13. The term *clone* does not appear in a comprehensive lexicon of gay slang originally published in 1972, an omission suggesting that its earliest argot usage must have been the mid-1970s. See Bruce Rodgers, *The Queens' Vernacular* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972); reprinted as *Gay Talk: A (Sometimes Outrageous) Dictionary of Gay Slang* (New York: Paragon, 1979).
14. Foucault writes: "We were right to condemn institutional monosexuality that was constricting, but the promise that we would love women as soon as we were no longer condemned for being gay was utopian. And a utopia in the dangerous sense, not because it promised good relations with women but because it was at the expense of monosexual relations. In the often-negative response some French people have toward certain types of American behavior, there is still that disapproval of monosexuality. So occasionally we hear: 'What? How can you approve of those macho models? You're always with men, you have mustaches and leather jackets, you wear boots, what kind of masculine image is that?' Maybe in ten years we'll laugh about it all. But I think in the schema of a man affirming himself as a man, there is a movement toward redefining the monosexual relation. It consists of saying, 'Yes, we spend our time with men, we have mustaches, and we kiss each other,' without one of the partners having to play the nelly [*éphèbe*] or the effeminate, fragile boy.... We have to admit this is all something very new and practically unknown in Western societies. The Greeks never admitted love between two *adult men*" (Foucault, "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will," trans. Brendan Lemon, in *Essential Works*, vol. 1, 161-162, brackets in original).
15. Blue bandannas break down like this:

<i>Worn on LEFT</i>		<i>Worn on RIGHT</i>
Wants Head	Light Blue	Expert Cocksucker
Sixty-Niner	Robin's Egg Blue	Sixty-Nine
Cop	Medium Blue	Cop-Sucker
Fucker	Navy Blue	Fuckee
Cock and Ball	Teal Blue	Cock and Ball
Torturer		Torturee

- Clearly the implications of failing to distinguish, say, light blue from teal blue can be quite dramatic. Today, however, the hanky code has fallen into desuetude, supplanted by the greater convenience and explicitness of online cruising, in which participants spell out directly what they desire. Nevertheless, as in newspaper personals, a form of shorthand has developed in online cruise ads that is sufficiently complex to warrant the kind of translations offered by my hanky code card. For instance, Barebackcity.com, a website for gay men who want sex without protection, offers a handy glossary covering the 60 or so abbreviations and acronymic terms that one is likely to encounter while cruising its site (see <http://misc.barebackcity.com/abbreviations.asp>). What fascinates me is how — whether with the hanky code or in online cruise ads — the semiotic system tends to outstrip the competence of its users, thereby verging on a specifically *symbolic* order in which, as Lacan says, "man is always cultivating a great many more signs than he thinks" (Lacan, *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvania Tomaselli [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 122). That is to say, in these subcultural semiotic worlds there is an unconscious.
16. See Dean, "Unlimited Intimacy: Barebacking, Bugchasing, Giftgiving" (unpublished paper).
17. Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 107.
18. For scat, piss, spit, or "heavy S&M," wear brown, yellow, pale yellow, or black bandannas, respectively.
19. "Only an emphasis on the specifics of sameness can help us to avoid collaborating in the disciplinary tactics that would make us invisible" (Bersani, *Homos*, 42).
20. Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); see also Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 197-222.

21. Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).
22. See Parveen Adams, *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Differences* (London: Routledge, 1996); Graham L. Hammill, *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe, and Bacon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).
23. In a brilliant meditation on Ralph Waldo Emerson's impersonality, Sharon Cameron claims that "there cannot help but be resistance to the idea of the impersonal since the consequences of the impersonal destroy being the only way we think we know it" (Cameron, "The Way of Life by Abandonment: Emerson's Impersonal," *Critical Inquiry* 25:1 [Autumn 1998]: 31). I would argue instead that the impersonal shows the extent to which the way we think we know being is mistaken. What the impersonal destroys is not being but selfhood. Having suggested how Bersani could be read as Lacanian, I am not about to suggest that we now read him as Emersonian, but rather that his work could be considered within a genealogy of impersonality that would include Emersonian philosophy.
24. Bersani, "Genital Chastity," in Dean and Lane (eds.), 366.
25. Bersani, "Against Monogamy," in *Beyond Redemption: The Work of Leo Bersani*, ed. Timothy Clark and Nicholas Royle, a special issue of *Oxford Literary Review*, 20:1-2 (1998): 19.

