

SIMILITUDE, OR WHY SAMENESS IS NOT A SYNONYM FOR GAYNESS

christopher lane

Although "sameness" usually has negative connotations, describing all that is bland and homogeneous, when the term crops up in lesbian and gay politics it tends to carry a positive spin, promising equality via a logic of equivalence. In this context, equivalence becomes a precursor to equality, the latter its reward. For instance, the Human Rights Campaign adopted as its logo a simple equal sign ("="); in doing so, this national gay and lesbian organization wanted to convey that homosexuals should lack none of the social, legal, and political advantages currently bestowed on heterosexuals. Implying unity by its leveling effect on psychosexual relations, sameness in this guise not only heralds compatibility among equals, but also permits healthy substitutions rendering men and women, and gays and straights, almost interchangeable. Thus has the "homo" succeeded in making the "homogeneous" almost sexy.

My concern is the logic of this equivalence — the homology binding and collapsing disparate homosexualities — which flourishes beyond political strategies, in theories now associated with them. When sameness is understood as synonymous with "gayness," what gets masked is an asymmetry subtending same-sex relations, obscuring substitution's practical and conceptual limitations. Some of the idealist rhetoric accompanying accounts of sameness casts this state as a precursor to relational extension and collective fusion among gays and lesbians, in ways apparently escaping the dyadic crises marring heterosexual coupling. Such reasoning is, I think, selective and mistaken, not only concealing vast cultural differences among lesbians and gay men, but also hinting at a form of psychical alikeness that simplifies a plethora of sexual identifications, including their real or "extrasymbolic" effects.

When gay and lesbian sexualities are couched in this way, much — though not all — psychoanalytic wisdom disappears. This is partly because homosexuality can seem to obviate sexual difference and to escape the difficulty inherent in all forms of human desire. Accordingly,

lesbians and gay men are said to enjoy intimacies that, owing to shared genitality, are devoid of “real” implications — which is to say, unsymbolizable effects that may result in bliss and pleasure as well as shock, distress, and even trauma. As homophobia continues to burgeon, the desire to associate homosexuality solely with pleasure seems understandable, but it’s also intellectually and politically limiting. And while attention to the differences besetting this model of sameness logically should destroy it, as inconsistencies betray assumptions about gay unanimity, what tends to happen instead is that those highlighting the drawbacks of this model are cast as hostile to queer thought and thus as advocates of such fiercely contested topics as monogamy, gay marriage, and normativity. By contrast, those advocating sameness become locked in assumptions about compatible forms of antifamilialism — assumptions that surely need examining.

In order to study the conceptual ramifications of these debates, I shall consider Leo Bersani’s work in some detail, for it’s both the most eloquent statement about sameness — or what he calls “inaccurate self-replication” — and the farthest-reaching attempt at stressing the relational possibilities of near-alikeness. Although I will begin by addressing conceptual differences between Bersani’s *Homos* and *Caravaggio’s Secrets*, co-authored with Ulysse Dutoit, I want to use those differences to compare Bersani’s recent reading of Plato’s *Symposium* to Lacan’s thoughts on this multivalent text. In doing so, I hope to put in relief the claim that the movement of Bersani’s recent work hews closest to the positive effects of “nonantagonistic sameness” in queer theory, whereas Lacan’s stresses the volatile or real implications of similitude between sexual partners.¹ Disputing that *sameness* is an apt synonym for gayness, I will argue that *similitude* is in fact a better term, having profound implications for queer thought. Indeed, the advantage of this latter term, including political interest in the range and difficulty of gay and lesbian desires, offsets the loss of any specificity attached to claims about sameness.

Attentive readers may note that Bersani is not a simple proponent of either sameness or queer theory. Indeed, his emphasis on “*inaccurate* self-replication” logically should limit the value he places on what he calls “homo-ness,” bringing him closer to Lacanian arguments about asymmetry and similitude. Intriguingly, however, Bersani not only has resisted this last move, but has done so by voicing objections to Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly its emphasis on lack as a precursor to all forms of desire. Consequently, it is impossible to engage fully with his objections from within the purview of Lacanianism without appearing to miss the point or to beg the question. This is why my reading of Bersani’s work revisits his and Lacan’s different arguments about Plato, adopting an approach that is both comparative and necessarily disjunctive. For, paradoxically, when Bersani is closest to the question of similitude (via that of “inaccurate self-replication”), he is also most opposed to Lacanian arguments and most fascinated by works ostensibly promoting extensibility, including those of Plato, Caravaggio, and Jean Laplanche,

an analyst-philosopher whom some prize as more heterodox and accessible than Lacan but others regard as a mere borrower and diluter of Lacan's arguments who gains popularity in exact proportion to his perceived distance from Lacan.

Although I see truth in each claim, a full discussion of this complex turn in French psychoanalysis is beyond the scope of this essay. Beginning instead with the fascinating conceptual differences between *Homos* and *Caravaggio's Secrets*, we can assess how each book represents extensibility, one of the factors distinguishing Bersani's work as excitingly original. In *Homos*, for instance, extensibility makes possible the kind of pluralized sameness that gives the book its arresting title. "Homo-ness" is for Bersani "[a]n anticomunal mode of connectedness," because, in an oxymoronic fashion, it dissolves before supplementing selfhood. "Homo-ness" generates a tenuous "we," that is, whose "pleasing instability" allows us to reconceive sociality.²

Yet there is obviously an intriguing tension in Bersani's title, because in plural form the "homo" ceases to signify pure "sameness," owing to Bersani's near-contemporaneous emphasis on "inaccurate self-replication," and instead gestures to an alterity in homosexuality that lies in tension with what is "hetero," or "other," to sameness. That is, the nouns "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" have Greek rather than Latin etymologies, and thus signify "same-" and "other-sexuality," rather than biological sex. Because of Bersani's interest in sameness, however, in *Homos* he cannot easily navigate or sustain this conceptual distinction between "same-" and "other-sexuality." In *Caravaggio's Secrets*, by contrast, Bersani and Dutoit point their argument about extensibility in a different, less sexually specific direction, placing stronger emphasis on "inaccurate self-replication" relative to space and inorganic matter.³ The phrase and argument recur in Bersani's most recent essays, "Genital Chastity" and "Against Monogamy," where Bersani writes evocatively about "the subject's non-intimate connections" to the world, including but not reducible to "multitudinous points of disseminated sociality."⁴

On the face of things, this shift may not seem dramatic. There are even grounds for arguing that Bersani's earlier work — including his brilliant essay "Lawrentian Stillness" — questions if identity multiplied or replicated remains identity at all.⁵ Nevertheless, the arguments in Bersani's recent books vary in ways pertinent to my discussion. Whereas in *Homos* Bersani's key interest is the tension between political self-recognition and the dissolution of selfhood through same-sex erotic bliss, *Caravaggio's Secrets* styles connectedness in a post-identitarian fashion, without immediate regard for sexual politics. For this reason, it deals less with homosexuality, yet also critiques psychoanalytic accounts of "lack-in-being." Discussing the aesthetic and ontological ramifications of subjective dispersal, Bersani and Dutoit contend that, through art — and Caravaggio's in particular — we can locate a "relational system" generally obscured by politics and ideology (73).⁶ Rather than advancing a corresponding fantasy that art should "restore a fantasmatic wholeness," Caravaggio allegedly highlights "an active insertion into the movement

of being,” signaling that “we are not *cut off* from anything; nothing escapes connectedness, the play of and between forms” (72). Connectedness resulting from “inaccurate self-replication” is thus central to Bersani and Dutoit’s ethico-political view of human relations. A basis for their critique of psychoanalysis, the question of connectedness emerges from their interest in a form of sameness that is nonantagonistic, representing desires that are irreducible to specific groups or persons. A move that Bersani might have called “de-gaying” in *Homos* is, in *Caravaggio’s Secrets*, a sign of our almost symbiotic relationship to the world.

For instance, in their analysis of Caravaggio’s *Betrayal of Christ*, Bersani and Dutoit claim that “the very distinction between subjective and objective is meaningless,” because Caravaggio “immobiliz[es these] relations” (71, 72). Later, they change tack slightly, arguing that the painter’s interest in his subjects’ “between-ness” represents “a casual, poignant and haunting intimacy” between the two realms we inhabit: that of “physical individuated existence” and that of “being as a disseminated connectedness throughout the universe” (82). Accordingly, the “distinction between subjective and objective” does not completely disappear. Rather, it gets displaced by Caravaggio’s willingness to render additional relationships to the world, a sign, ultimately, “of the natural extensibility of all being.”⁷

Although Bersani and Dutoit might see little value in this move, we could connect what they are arguing here to a body of psychoanalytic work that elaborates on that part of being that remains surplus and unrepresentable. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, for instance, Freud explicitly juxtaposes feelings of “oneness with the universe” with a “repugnance which cannot...always be accounted for,” but which is often directed at loved ones.⁸ He does so to underscore the uneasy coexistence in every subject of what, following Lacan, we would now call real and imaginary identifications, the former having effects almost contrary to the Romantic motif of “oneness with the universe” that Freud scornfully dismisses. As Bersani recognizes — indeed, discusses at length in “Against Monogamy” — psychoanalysis’s conceptual understanding of objects yields a tangled, even antagonistic rendering of desire and lack-in-being. At such moments, the resulting stress on our inability to leave anything “forgotten, given up, [or] left behind” clashes with his and Dutoit’s thoughts on relationality (19). For Gide, Proust, and Genet, as Bersani eloquently writes in *Homos*, “otherness is articulated as relay stations in a process of self-extension,” not as a register whose strangeness elicits shock and even trauma.⁹ So, central to this comparative discussion of sameness are quite different ways of conceiving gaps among subjects and the psychical remnants that drive them together before, perhaps, flinging them apart. Whereas in Bersani’s model such remnants generally enable connections between same-sex partners (as, for instance, “a nonthreatening supplement to sameness”),¹⁰ in Freud’s and Lacan’s terms such remnants, thwarting reciprocity, permit tragicomic forms of connection governed largely (though not entirely) by the subject’s post-Oedipal bearings.

It should be clear, I hope, that these differences are not trivial or minor quibbles; they represent almost contrary ways of conceiving our sexed and sexual relationship to other beings (“people” or “subjects” would sound anachronistic here). In Bersani and Dutoit’s hands, for example, being is rendered extensible, nonappropriative, and nonproprietary; in Lacan’s hands (and often in Freud’s), the subject *extrapolated* violently from being tends to endure a hostile, even paranoid relationship to the world. However, rather than addressing such elements as drive, affect, and the gap between the subject and its body, Bersani and Dutoit, in their analysis of Caravaggio’s *St. John the Baptist with a Ram*, stress the enabling conditions of the painting’s “illuminated relationality” (72): “In their outward spread, the horns de-narrativize the picture, extending the youth away from himself, connecting him, as the other fanlike structures [in the painting] do, to a realm of being he can’t contain, where there are no borders or figures, no beginning or end. This, then, is the youth’s secret, one not of interiority but rather of indefinite extensibility, a secret of unrepresented, and unrepresentable, ontological affinities” (82).

One could say much about this fascinating interpretation. To begin with, Bersani and Dutoit’s partial rejection of Laplanche’s model of the “enigmatic signifier” arguably makes possible their stress on “indefinite extensibility” and “unrepresentable, ontological affinities.” But, as I will soon show, their thoughts on these ineffable connections would look quite different if we filtered them through the Lacanian concepts of the lamella and the real. Moreover, sameness for Bersani and Dutoit is not organized by resemblance to even another being or body; it arises from the youth’s apparent uninterest in self-duplication. Ceasing to care about physical and psychic boundaries, the young man does not sequester elements of the external world, and displays little or no regard for self-possession. He seems to accept that he is positioned “somewhere between two realms of being”: the physical and the ontological (82).

For Bersani and Dutoit, this radical uninterest in selfhood represents an intoxicating reprieve from the burdens of consciousness and the jouissance that limns our relationship to objects. Released from anxiety about relational insufficiency, Caravaggio’s youth is spared the type of suffering that, according to Lacan, molds desire as an imaginary antidote to ontological lack. What Bersani and Dutoit want to reconceive here is nothing less than a tradition from Plato to Lacan (and beyond) that has viewed desire as an outcome of “lack-in-being,” such that the subject seeks solace in that which is *not* self-identical to it. But the questions, I think, are whether Bersani and Dutoit can finally displace psychoanalytic attention to castration and loss as factors prefiguring desire, and whether their alternative is psychically and conceptually persuasive.

Before answering these questions, we should note in passing that *identity* itself means a type of “sameness.” The Latin term *idem* (“same”) spawned the late Latin noun *identitas*, which represents the “quality of being the same.”¹¹ Identity itself is thus predicated on a notion of replication, though one that Bersani would not favor, since it offers only egoic narcissism through

the replication, rather than the dissolution, of identity. The whole thrust of his work from at least *A Future for Astyanax* on is, indeed, to engage with impulses that “obliterate the very field in which the anecdotes of personality are possible.”¹² Thus in “Against Monogamy,” he speaks of “refiguring...the relational” as a way to “help us to elaborate modes of being-in-the-world to which the concept of identity itself might be irrelevant.”¹³

At such moments, one sees why D. H. Lawrence’s fascination with “lapsing out” of consciousness and Samuel Beckett’s interests in stasis influence Bersani’s argument so profoundly: for if desire simply permits “the *extensibility of sameness*,” generating a demand for objects perceived only as “*more of what [one] is*,”¹⁴ then within these terms the alterity of the object must vanish alongside what is most ontologically injurious about the drive’s enabling attachments in the first place.¹⁵ Eschewing what is most antipathetic to consciousness about our unconscious sexual relation to objects, Bersani risks resurrecting in modified form (as Lawrence arguably does in *Women in Love*) the very egoic structure that would derail his anti-identitarian argument. While the unconscious escapes integration or accommodation, it also disables any hope of *rapprochement* between sexuality and an extensible ego. Bersani would say, at such moments, that castration is an unnecessary roadblock here, limiting extensibility to post-Oedipal configurations, because it is irrelevant to the forms of connection he wants to amplify beyond subjectivity and personhood; yet it is also here, for Lacanians, that the negative associations of the real cannot be bracketed or dismissed by fiat, not least because the real is inseparable from the very movement toward objects that Bersani wants to cultivate.

“Within the Freudian scheme,” Bersani and Dutoit rightly observe, “the ego’s profound mistrust of the world can be ‘overcome’ only by a narcissistic identification with the hated object, one that masochistically introjects that object” (41). It would indeed be difficult to advance a psychoanalytic understanding of objects that did not involve violence or, at the very least, radical suspicion, whether the object is hated. But the question goes beyond whether Bersani and Dutoit can posit “ego-identifications (or ego-extensions, we would now be inclined to say)” that are “not reducible to a sexualizing shattering of the ego or to the sadistic project of destroying what is different from the ego” (41). In advancing this formulation, they recast the category of the real by turning it into a realm promoting connection rather than trauma or impossibility. Published the same year as *Caravaggio’s Secrets*, “Against Monogamy” suggests — in a way quite contrary to Lacan — that identification “can truly dissolve the fixity of Oedipal desires that are, paradoxically, at once monogamous and promiscuous.”¹⁶

In displacing Freud’s and Lacan’s interest in more mimetic (and consequently violent) aspects of identification, Bersani and Dutoit risk returning desire to the field of positivity, rather than that of the unconscious and lack. It is facile to imply the recurrence of a secret identitarianism in their work (something I am not claiming), not least because they caution so eloquently against

this result. Yet it is difficult to see how “ego-extensions,” even in this modified form, can escape the most violent and restrictive aspects of imaginized relations. Additionally, questions arise about how the drive and the real might be sundered without destroying connectivity entirely; and how, concerning objects and sexuality, these relations could preserve the radically transformative potential of “unrepresentable ontological affinities” without either shoring up or completely destroying the ego, thereby incapacitating the subject (82). Given Bersani’s reliance on aesthetics and their account of “the procedures by which the mind de-phenomenalises the world,” some idealist and utopian strains of thought seem to inform their argument.¹⁷

Although there are profound differences among these scholars,¹⁸ Bersani and Dutoit do partly join Jonathan Dollimore and Judith Butler here, at least to the extent that all adopt various methods of recasting psychoanalytic arguments about lack, while in the process viewing castration as “an energized fixation permanently haunted by loss.” The phrase is Dollimore’s, who argues that Lacan’s “tragic ontology of desire” is apparent when the analyst discusses homosexuality in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*.¹⁹ In *Seminar I*, for instance, Lacan argues that the homosexual subject “exhausts himself in pursuing the desire of the other, which he will never be able to grasp as his own desire, because his own desire is the desire of the other....The intersubjective relation which subtends perverse desire is only sustained by the annihilation either of the desire of the other, or of the desire of the subject....[I]n the one as in the other, this relation dissolves the being of the subject.”²⁰ Dollimore represents this passage — and Lacanian accounts of perverse desire in general — as heterosexist, insofar as Lacan points to a problem about the *jouissance* of same-sex relations that heterosexuals apparently are more adept at masking. I am convinced neither that Lacan believes this, nor that he is wrong to address forms of *jouissance*, irreducible to homosexuality, whose outcome may be bliss, suffering, or both. Although this is surely a subject on which psychoanalysts have much to say, invariably it remains one on which even the most capacious forms of queer theory skid to an abrupt halt.

So, for the sake of clarity, we should stress what may be obvious to readers of this journal: Lacan insists that the *objet a* is not symbolizable, but is instead a little piece of the real coated with *jouissance*. That is, not only is the *objet a* inimical to selfhood and resistant to meaning, but it is also “foreign” to the ego, and thus an entity both eliciting connection and thwarting extensibility. Lacan even implies that the *objet a* is violently stimulating precisely to the degree that it fails to sanction union or lasting intimacy. In his “schema L,” moreover, he indicates — in ways Bersani presumably would support — that the ego mistakes as self-identical the specular being (*a*) in which it aspires to find itself. This, then, is partly Lacan’s explanation for “inaccurate self-replication,” though in his model it is constitutive of subjectivity — which is also to say, ontologically *disabling*, because it remains in basic tension with being. To this fascinating argument, Lacan adds two factors that Bersani, in his most recent work, has begun to downplay.

First, the “wall of language” enabling symbolic relations tends to block the imaginary axis, hemming in *imagoes* that are not easily symbolized.²¹ Second, the *objet a*, which seems to promise imaginary wholeness, is inseparable from the real, which means that *Lacan cannot conceive of self-extension independently of a realm that beleaguers meaning and mobility*. This point arguably goes to the heart of Bersani’s differences with Lacan, though it also surely indicates why Bersani is so reluctant to view the real as a negative entity and increasingly willing to join other critics in viewing castration as little more than a psychoanalytic fable promulgated by those either obsessed with loss or intent on conflating homosexuality with perversion. Lacan, by contrast, tells us what “the intersubjective relation” fantasmatically “annihilat[es]” in order to sustain itself, thereby implying that *even* self-extension is ontologically damaging.²²

As is well-known, however, Lacan viewed the ensuing sexual crisis as closer to comedy than tragedy. In fact, he says that Plato takes “the subject of *Eros*, that is to say, desire...in the *Symposium*...even to the point of farce.”²³ Moreover, instead of tilting the various failures of sexuality toward heteronormativity, Lacan, as Tim Dean compellingly shows, underscores the antinormative implications of his intrinsically “perverse” depiction of the *objet a*.²⁴ Of course, these arguments are not news to Bersani, who for years has outlined what is psychically and aesthetically compelling about *Laplanche’s* emphasis on the “enigmatic signifier,” partly to confront and partly to veer away from Lacan. Consequently, I wish to turn here to Bersani’s reading of Plato’s *Symposium*, since his account of this extraordinarily rich work forms the basis for his critique of psychoanalysis in “Genital Chastity.”

I cannot here document fully how multiple perspectives on desire jostle for prominence in Plato’s work, preventing any unitary description of love, lack, or desire. Whereas Phaedrus passionately extols virtue and self-sacrifice, for instance, Eryximachus de-sexualizes love by likening it to a sense of general “harmony,” applying it to almost everything in the world (medicine, music, meteorology, and so on). Enforcing the well-known, asymmetrical distinctions between the lover (*erastes*) and the beloved (*eromenos*), Plato nonetheless differs from both Freud and Bersani in rendering genital similarity *subsidiary* to the predominant, and more determinative, distinctions of age and rank in Hellenic culture. A sign of this asymmetry is Xenophon’s insistence that “the boy does not share in the man’s pleasure in intercourse, as a woman does; cold sober, he looks upon the other drunk with sexual desire.”²⁵ (As K. J. Dover adds, “what the *eromenos* get[s] out of submission to his *erastes*...is, no bodily pleasure; should he do so, he incurs disapproval as a *pornos* and as perverted.”)²⁶ Moreover, Freud stresses in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* that the object for the ancients was infinitely less important than the instinct — an emphasis that, Freud says, reverses ours, where “we despise the instinctual activity in itself, and find excuses for it only in the merits of the object.”²⁷ There is a strong risk, in other words, that we will call self-identical various traits of Hellenic philosophy and psychology, only to find that they were defined in ways quite contrary to our expectations.

One example would be Bersani's reading of Aristophanes' famous myth of the originally three sexes — male, female, and male-female — each having twice our number of limbs and organs.²⁸ For to be somewhat pedantic, if two-thirds of humanity in this fable can claim to desire on the basis of extending sameness (and for me this is a big if), then the remaining one-third of humanity — the one that was male-female and that splits from “androgyny” into heterosexuality — *cannot* operate in this way. Because this original third undermines Bersani's point about sameness, he includes it only as an afterthought;²⁹ I suggest that it should be the exception that disproves any “rule” attributed to sameness. Nor is it incidental that Zeus instructs Apollo in the fable to turn around the necks and faces of the cleaved entities “toward the wound, so that each person would see that he'd been cut and keep better order.”³⁰ For even after our navels have been sewn up, Aristophanes implies, we retain a physical “reminder of what happened long ago”³¹ — a sort of phylogenetic memory of loss that keeps us looking for replacements. The unmistakable suggestion here is that desire arises from a *deficiency* of being — indeed, as an effect of castration.

Lack is so integral to desire in the *Symposium*, we might say, that Aristophanes cannot represent the latter without the former. What of sameness? Do these replacements bear any semblance to our “original,” lost self? Glossing Aristophanes' well-known concession that “the nearest approach to [the ideal] is best in present circumstances,”³² Bersani writes: “We love...inaccurate replications of ourselves. The philosophical lesson of the fable is that we relate to difference by recognizing and longing for sameness.”³³ Summing up Aristophanes' argument, Lacan too underscores in seminar eleven “the search by the subject, not of the sexual complement, but of the part of himself, lost forever, that is constituted by the fact that he is only a sexed living being, and that he is no longer immortal.”³⁴ But here the resemblance to Bersani's argument ends. For Lacan goes on to speak about “the partial drive, ...profoundly a death drive,” which “through the lure of the sexed living being...induce[s us] [*induit*] into...sexual realization.”³⁵ The verb “induces” captures his sense that this is a forced choice, rather than a field of pleasure in which the subject elects to participate. What appears to be the missing part of ourselves, Lacan cautions, is really “the lamella,” a grotesque, unsymbolizable factor that intercedes between us and the object, “surviv[ing] any division, any scissiparous intervention.”³⁶ The lamella is in short “the libido, *qua* pure life instinct,” and thus “what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction.”³⁷ Underscoring a rationale for psychoanalytic emphasis on lack-in-being, the lamella impedes ego-extensions by running them alongside the impossible. This “unreal...[but] not imaginary” entity is, we might say, a conceptual check on any idealism we could attribute to self-extensibility.³⁸

Bersani's is evidently the most positive way of framing Aristophanes' claim that “love does the best that can be done for the time being.”³⁹ According to Bersani here, love for sameness eclipses the crucial *rift instantiating* the demand for such love in the first place. Overall, he wants us “to

see difference not as a trauma to be overcome but as the non-threatening supplement to sameness⁴⁰ — hence his suggestion that castration should be irrelevant to this scenario. Yet as Lacan’s eleventh seminar makes clear, there is a very different way of reading these sentences — a way, resembling the narrator’s thoughts in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, insisting bleakly that “completeness is not to be prophesied, or even conceived as possible. Enough that in the present case, as in millions, it was not the two halves of a perfect whole that confronted each other at the perfect moment; a missing counterpart wandered independently about the earth waiting in crass obtuseness till the late time came. Out of which maladroit delay sprang anxieties, disappointments, shocks, catastrophes, and passing-strange destinies.”⁴¹ According to Hardy’s narrator, this “counterpart” or lamella is the very entity that thwarts sameness and union, rendering both impossible. If one adopted the model that Hardy and Lacan espouse, in other words, the idea that sameness is possible, desirable, and sustainable would quickly crumble. The closest subjects get to each other, in this second paradigm, is in an experience of the asymmetry and similitude that ensues from the bungling and awkward “delay” — an effect that holds whether or not the gap opens between same- or differently-sexed beings. Thus does similitude finally part company with sameness.

Let me spell out the most politically contentious outcome of this distinction. When similitude replaces sameness and affinity substitutes for “homo-ness,” the popular idea that homo- and heterosexuality follow different ontological and political tracks proves unfounded.⁴² Here is the rub for many scholars, who want queerness to be both inclusive and antinormative — that is, to absorb radical elements of even heterosexuality while spearheading a set of interventions against the family, marriage, the state, and so on.⁴³ The point is that arguments about queerness still rely on conceptually untenable and impoverished notions of sexual-political specificity. Thus, although Bersani amplifies in *Homos* the effects of “a potentially revolutionary inaptitude — perhaps inherent in gay desire — for sociality as it is known,”⁴⁴ Hardy’s and Lacan’s interest lies in the “maladroit delay” interrupting all such sexual homologies, implying that same- and differently-sexed objects wreak the same ontological havoc on us all, since in both cases the *objet a* is inseparable from the real.

My point is similar to the one that Guy Hocquenghem makes in the recently translated essay “On Homo-Sex, or Is Homosexuality a Curable Vice?” In this somewhat inchoate meditation on sameness and sexuality, whose conclusion differs considerably (though not entirely) from Bersani and Dutoit’s, Hocquenghem contends that queer arguments about sexual specificity and “content” rely on false conceptions of sexual truth and authenticity. He tries to eviscerate sexual categories of content, that is, whereas Bersani and Dutoit, despite aspiring to have the same effect on subjectivity, nonetheless tie “homo-ness” to (homo)sexual specificity. According to Hocquenghem, “[n]o two points, subjects or persons are truly similar, for the space in which

a comparison might be made is but the pattern woven between monads striving to be.”⁴⁵ These dissimilar monads weaving their pattern necessarily cannot sustain discrete sexual identities, which means that Hocquenghem — although he does not quite acknowledge this — makes homo- and heterosexuality conceptually indistinguishable.

Although Hocquenghem’s Leibnizian (and Lacanian) formulation about “monads striving to be” stems partly from his admission, circa 1987, that he shares with many gays and lesbians a “desire to ‘blend in,’” he does not advance this point in the interests of assimilation or quietism. On the contrary, Hocquenghem’s concern is “less a desire to hide than to be undifferentiated,” which sounds like an impressively Gallic spin on queer theory.⁴⁶ For the latter, undifferentiation may sound vexing, to the extent that it seems to accept the status quo. Counterintuitively, however, Hocquenghem views this position as *intensifying* homophobic conflict, precisely *because* the result downplays differences between homo- and heterosexuality. Such an outcome — a “near imperceptibility” or “subtle lack of differentiation” between gays and straights — allegedly irks homophobes more than does homosexuality’s “frank...visibility.”⁴⁷

Although I support Hocquenghem’s interest in emptying sexual categories of meaning and apparent consistency, I think his thoughts on homophobic violence are for two reasons untenable. If perfect undifferentiation were possible (much less desirable) for all sexed beings — a notion echoing Aristophanes’ fable — then homophobia logically would dissipate or prove impossible to enforce, since persons would be indistinguishable in terms of sexual preference. More relevant to my argument, Hocquenghem’s emphasis on the *illusion* of “tru[e] similar[ity]” among gays and lesbians breaks down the spirit of relationality driving “homo-ness.” Recall his point that “[n]o two points, subjects or persons are truly similar, for the space in which a comparison might be made is but the pattern woven between monads striving to be.” Invoking what I earlier described as interpersonal crises of asymmetry, Hocquenghem’s point renders moot — even poignantly absurd — any thought of sameness at the level of groups and communities.⁴⁸ Indeed, given this perspective on dyadic relations, it is impossible to extrapolate from his formulations a vision of non-antagonistic sameness. Instead, the proximity between subjects is, from his perspective, a cause of passion and violence — the “narcissism,” indeed, “of minor differences.”⁴⁹

In short, and for different reasons, problems of specificity haunt and beset Hocquenghem’s and Bersani’s accounts of “near imperceptibility” and “homo-ness.” The very bid to dissolve distinctions between gays — indeed, between persons — cannot feasibly coalesce with a contrary desire to view sexuality, however paradoxically, as determined by non-shattering sameness. One need only read Bersani’s earlier work on sexuality, especially in *The Freudian Body*, to grasp why. So, while it is possible to tie his more recent work to perceptions of Lacanian heterosexism and the “prejudicial hierarchies of difference” organizing heterosexual couples and families,⁵⁰ it also seems necessary to concede that the argument pulls in two directions here.

Bersani cannot convincingly turn lack into an “*extensibility of sameness*” without reinstating even notional control over our movement toward objects. These, I have argued chiefly via Lacan, propel us toward the impossible real as it manifests itself in and beyond other people.⁵¹ To paraphrase Hocquenghem, the real is one of the key reasons “no two points, subjects or persons are truly similar”; this register is also why “the space in which a comparison might be made” besets *and* makes possible “the pattern woven between monads striving to be.”

When Bersani argues in “Against Monogamy” that “an alien world best exercises its seduction when it appears with the familiar aspect of sameness,” he makes a related point, but not to the same end.⁵² “Sameness” may be a “familiar aspect” to us, but it is a fallacy to view even superficial likeness as a way to offset or counteract what is most intolerable about our “alien world.” The latter eventually overrides all presumptions of homology and equivalence among lesbians and gay men, manifesting real traits that shatter any equals sign we might erect as a fragile bulwark in our defense.



I am very grateful to Tim Dean, Christopher Herbert, Mikko Tuhkanen, and the editorial board at *UMBR(a)* for comments on an earlier draft.

1. According to the *OED*, *similitude* refers to subjects who “resemble” each other — that is, who bear “the likeness of some other person or thing.”
2. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 10, 76, 9.
3. Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio’s Secrets* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 5. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
4. 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): 5. See also *ibid.*, 20, and Bersani, “Genital Chastity,” *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 361, 363, 365.
5. Bersani, “Lawrentian Stillness,” in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 164, 174, 179.
6. See also Bersani, “Against Monogamy,” 20-21.
7. *Ibid.*, 20.
8. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth, 1953-1974), 21:72, 106n.
9. Bersani, *Homos*, 7.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. T. F. Hoad (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 227.
12. Bersani, “Lawrentian Stillness,” 164.
13. Bersani, “Against Monogamy,” 5.
14. Bersani, “Genital Chastity,” 365.
15. In “Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness,” in Dean and Lane (eds.), esp. 122, 126 — an essay to which I am indebted — Tim Dean argues that at such moments otherness is psychically distinct from difference, and that the subject can experience the former without the latter. I am arguing, by contrast, that Bersani’s rhetorical and conceptual stress on the object being “*more of what [one] is*” collapses this distinction by perceptually recasting what is most “foreign” and inassimilable about the object. On this point, we might note that the noun *object* (stemming from the Latin *objectum*), designating what is “throw[n] towards” or “place[d] in front of” an entity, is etymologically related to *objection*, signifying an “obstacle,” or “something presented to the sight” (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, 318).
16. Bersani, “Against Monogamy,” 15.
17. *Ibid.*, 18.
18. I discuss these differences in “Uncertain Terms of Pleasure,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 43:4 (1996): 813; and “Dispensing with the Self: Bersani and Self-Divestiture,” in Clark and Royle (eds.), 47-73.
19. Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 202. Similarly, Judith Butler argues that “there does seem to be a romanticization or, indeed, a religious idealization of ‘failure,’ humility and limitation before the Law, which makes the Lacanian narrative ideologically suspect,” even after conceding that “every identification, precisely because it has a phantasm as its ideal, is bound to fail” and that Lacan “partially pursued...the ‘comedic’ dimension of sexual ontology” (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [New York: Routledge, 1990], 56, 55, 47).

20. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 221-222, also qtd. in Dollimore, 202.
21. Lacan, *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 244.
22. Ibid.
23. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 232.
24. See Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), ch. 6.
25. Qtd. in K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 52.
26. Ibid.
27. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *SE* 7:149n.
28. Bersani, "Genital Chastity," 365.
29. Ibid.
30. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 190E.
31. Ibid., 191A.
32. Ibid., 193C.
33. Bersani, "Genital Chastity," 365.
34. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 205.
35. Ibid.; Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 187.
- John Brenkman provides a slightly different but still largely compatible account of Lacan's relation to the *Symposium* in "The Other and the One: Psychoanalysis, Reading, the *Symposium*," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), esp. 414-432. See also Morris B. Kaplan, "Eros Unbound: A Queer Reading of Plato's *Symposium*," in *Sexual Justice: Democratic Citizenship and the Politics of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 81-113.
36. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 197.
37. Ibid., 198.
38. Ibid., 205.
39. Plato, 193D.
40. Bersani, "Against Monogamy," 20.
41. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 83.
42. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 96.
43. See, for instance, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's list of what is "queer" in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.
44. Bersani, *Homos*, 76.
45. Guy Hocquenghem, "On Homo-Sex, or Is Homosexuality a Curable Vice?," trans. Bill Marshall, *New Formations* 39 (1999-2000): 74. Similarly, Adam Phillips squelches two patients' anxious fantasies of cloning and self-replication, declaring with reassuring authority: "People, in actuality, can never be identical to each other. Perhaps this relentless wish for absolute identity — that even real cloning cannot satisfy — conceals, tries to talk us out of, a profound doubt

about our being the same as anything” (Phillips, “Sameness Is All,” in *Promises, Promises: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Literature* [New York: Basic, 2001], 341). The point has special meaning, of course, in the context of even “inaccurate self-replication.”

46. Hocquenghem, 74.

47. Ibid.

48. This point is elaborated, albeit to different ends, in Robert Browning’s *Fifine at the Fair*, in which Don Juan, seeking to justify adultery with Fifine, explains to his wife, Elvire, that their marital estrangement is inevitable:

Never shall I believe any two souls were made
 Similar; granting, then, each soul of every grade
 Was meant to be itself, prove in itself complete
 And, in completion, good, — nay, best o’ the kind, — as meet
 Needs must it be that show on the outside correspond
 With inward substance, — flesh, the dress which soul has
 donned,

Exactly reproduce, — were only justice done
 Inside and outside too, — types perfect everyone.
 How happens it that here we meet a mystery
 Insoluble to man, a plaguy puzzle?

(Browning, *Fifine at the Fair*, in *Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew with Thomas J. Collins [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981], vol. 2, 26 [ll. 43.655-664]).

49. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *SE* 21:114.

50. Bersani, “Against Monogamy,” 5.

51. This is one reason Nancy’s comparable meditations on the ontology of coexistence, in *Being Singular Plural*, stressing “the proximity that disperses [écarte]” selfhood, have nothing to say about sexuality and sexual difference (Nancy, 96). Underscoring key philosophical differences between what is self-identical and what is merely similar to consciousness, Nancy cannot render sexuality even a limited anchoring point in his perspective on spacing and commingling. To this extent, Bersani might find Nancy’s

argument attractive. Nevertheless, crises over jouissance and the lamella fall out of Nancy’s discussion of coexistence, as if this condition were for him unimaginable without the foreclosure of everything, concerning sexuality, that guarantees the failure of coexistence.

52. Bersani, “Against Monogamy,” 16.

