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Leo Bersani and the Nostalgia for White Male Radicalism

(on Leo Bersani, *Homos* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995])

Intellectual hipsters, as Andrew Ross remarked several years ago, have always shared an unadmitted kinship with conservative guardians of culture. Both the radical left and the right tend to situate themselves as pariahs of the mainstream social order and arrogate a superiority to mass values (Ross 82). Appropriating for themselves the messianic ground of the higher or purer outside, Mailer's *White Negroes* circumscribed critical consciousness within a narrow logic of repudiation: the hipster was to identify with whatever was disavowed by conventional or white or straight society (Butler 87). Within recent years lesbian and gay studies has recapitulated the rhetorical strategies of Ross' hipsters to legitimate its institutional foundations. To distinguish the domain of their work from feminism, they have enacted an originary separation, inaugurating a methodological disjunction between oppression based on sexual practice and social domination based on gender. Yet the recent trend to isolate sex from gender in lesbian and gay studies needs to attend, I would argue, to its disturbing implications within the current racialized and anti-feminist conservative backlash. What we may be seeing in the apparent fight for academic validity is an alarming symbiosis on a narratological level between lesbian and gay theorists and Log Cabin Republicans that would derail a genuine engagement with queer theory: sexuality is not, as recent lesbian and gay theorists have pointed out, a derivative of gender, but, on the other hand, we need to realize that an analysis of sexual relations apart from an investigation of gender (or race and class) only ushers in a libertarianism that is socially reactionary.

In his new book *Homos*, Leo Bersani issues an unacknowledged polemic within lesbian and gay studies' internecine cultural war. And sexual isolationists could have found no more eloquent or posturing a hipster to argue for the holier and less assimilative ground of disengendered gay studies than Bersani. A subcultural Puritan, Bersani offers a sexy jeremiad calling upon the gay male community not to backslide into assimilationist politics and identitarian invisibility lest we lose the good fight against repressive heterosexist norms. But Bersani's comments are more than truthful, although trite, repetitions of radical angst over co-optation by the center. On the contrary, Bersani's admonitions sound uneasily like sound bites of a native informant for Newt Gingrich's own "revolutionary" new world order. Behind his rhetoric of radical

chic, Bersani asks gay studies to return to an Eisenhower-era, racially hygienic radicalism before today's emasculating postcolonial sensitivity training. Amidst theoretical sleight-of-hand, Bersani writes an Oedipal narrative in which homos must differentiate themselves from the suffocating "mother" of feminism. While professing to herald a liberating reorganization of society, however, Bersani identifies "homo-ness" with arelativity or what he sees as the retrieved patriarchal outside to the multicultural left. As a consequence, Bersani's revolutionary reorganization would function only to justify white men in a renewed exclusion of women and fetishization of minorities—only this second time around we white gay men, Bersani intimates, would be able to join the fraternity.

Gay studies has always divided, as Tim Edwards has written, over whether its focus should be on gender or sexual oppression (37). The disingenuousness of Bersani's polemics in the first two chapters of his book ("The Gay Presence" and "The Gay Absence") lies in his deflection of attention away from an overt discussion of this division behind a familiar activist ambivalence over assimilation. In defending in these chapters, as he says, an anti-essentialist gay specificity, Bersani simultaneously rewrites gay history so that it is gender studies (here coded as constructivism) which now obstructs liberation, or at least liberation for gay white men. At the core of Bersani's opening argument is the Foucauldian paradox that greater visibility of gays in the media and in public debates leads to new acculturative forms of control, and he reminds us rightly that as lesbigays try to fit themselves into a heterosexual mainstream society, they risk erasing their defining differences (11). However, amidst these forecasts of the margin's obsolescence, Bersani suppresses the buried referent of his study and thus elides nuanced analysis. In over-rationalized paranoid screeds that reductively caricature all of feminism as McKinnonian prudery, Bersani avers that our lesbian colleagues are coming after gay men with the castrating knife to rob us of our bodily pleasures. Judith Butler is the Anita Bryant of the gay nineties, who, by reducing all identities to performances, opens the way, even if she does not do so herself, for a moral crusade to reform all gay men into obedient sissies and fag hags: "Even more remarkably, we have even been heard to apologize for not being women. The relation of gay men to feminism is bound to be more problematic than anyone wants to admit" (63). *Homos* is replete with similar and recurring passages of gender anxiety that reveal Bersani to be a very problematic "countercultural" outlaw: certainly not one who wants to confess his own embodiment within gendered codes of behavior or, more specifically here, his internalization of society's misogyny (Boone 24).

It is easy to be seduced by Bersani's calm reasoned pose in *Homos* of terrible honesty. He has been (by reputation) our ancient mariner

clone in leather who has seen the dangerous conformist course on which gay studies is heading. He forewarns us rightly (as has even neoconservative gay activist Andrew Sullivan) that constructivist notions of gay identity can reaffirm the Christian Coalition belief that homosexuality is a moral choice or that it is an illness that can be corrected. His argument in *Homos* (when not fully understood) appeals to the gut feelings of many lesbigays, that their desires are not entirely the result of social conditioning since most of us come out, as David Bergman notes, by having to recognize an otherness inside ourselves that society will not let speak its name (30). To the extent that he elbows the intransigent body back into the constructivist's discursive transcendence, I think we should recognize Bersani performs a valuable service for gay studies. He is certainly among our most discerning critics who ask us to face unpleasant and incorrigible truths: that power is an irreducible part of our economy of desires; that, likewise, our sexual fantasies will always influence our political sympathies. But Bersani then uses this "specificity" of homo desire to dismantle lesbian and gay male political alliances, all the while continuing to pose as the Freudian expert of unconscious truths (58).

The real cultural work that Bersani's "homos" would perform is to restore to white gay men the patriarchal privilege of universalizing their own identities as the norm (the sameness) of gay studies. Similar to Bly's iron men, Bersani would spearhead—to a primitive drum beat—a men's movement within lesbigay studies that would put minorities and women back into their respective colonized places. Claiming a victim status for the white gay male, Bersani writes:

We [read white gay men] are in fact pariahs among minorities and oppressed groups. Feminists speak with distaste of our promiscuous male sexuality; African-Americans accuse us of neglecting the crucial issues of class and race for such luxuries as 'gay identity.' As white middle-class gay men, we are too much like our oppressors. (66)

Uninterested in answering these charges of misogyny, or racism, Bersani resolves in *Homos* simply to make white gay male consanguinity to the oppressor an "erotic" manifest destiny.

Bersani's racialization of white gay men, not surprisingly, depends on an ignorance of, or even disdain for, history. In *Gay New York*, George Chauncey traced the shift in the conceptualization of homosexuality after the Second World War (47). Whereas before the 1940s society and gay men themselves defined a homosexual identity according to gender, after the war the emergence of an identity based on sexual orientation allowed many gays to come out without having to forego their masculine identifications. Bersani, however, bases his notion of a gay specificity on an "identification theory" bereft of historical

discontinuities (65). Bersani's return to Freud (from Foucault) provides a paradigmatic illustration of the dangers of studying sexual practice apart from the sociology of gender, for it causes him to reduce Foucault's larger concern with the practices for the care of the self (and genealogy) to a singular interest in sex as the sole regime unifying the fictions of identity. In charting the fantasy identifications of his homos, Bersani argues that gay men really desire our culture's ideal images of masculinity: "In his desires, the gay man always runs the risk of identifying with culturally dominant images of *misogynist* maleness. For the sexual drives of gay men do, after all, extend beyond the rather narrow circle of other politically—correct gay men" (64, my italics). That Bersani's comments (overlooking their sneering homophobia about effeminate academics) are a reflection of what exists in the gay subculture is, it might be argued, largely true: gay men do overly value the straight-acting clone. But unless one assumes that all heterosexual men are misogynist, and I know few of the "radical man-hating lesbians" that Bersani fears who would agree with this assumption, it is hard to imagine why gay men *naturally* have affinities for misogyny *per se*.

By retrieving ahistorical Freudian paradigms without a tough-minded skepticism informed by recent feminist and postcolonial theory, Bersani ignores that desire for the ego ideal of the father is more than a product of the family romance. Our ego ideals of manhood have changed—and continue to change—over time, from self-sufficiency and independence in the 19th-century U.S. society to the more private sexual freedom today (which, as bell hooks has argued, may keep men, especially black men, from challenging their displacement and lack of material independence in society [94]). Nowhere in his reliance on Freudian paradigms does Bersani acknowledge the work of feminist psychoanalysts beginning with Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin, who have studied how historically specific patterns of mothering and family organization have reproduced a society in which women define themselves through their relation with others, while men learn to prize their disconnectedness. Tired of being scolded by what he sees as the maternal conscience of gay studies, Bersani turns his *Homos* into an protracted treatise designed to break our overextended unity with femininity and to discover instead a biologically truer paradise of bachelors represented by the work of Gide, Proust, and Genet.

In his third chapter, "The Gay Daddy," Bersani attempts to rescue gay studies by taking S/M as an exemplary transgressive practice because of its honest articulation of the inescapable intertwining of sexuality and power. While putting the "nastiness" (his word) of S/M in the face of supposedly Puritanical feminists who are in denial, Bersani himself resists confronting the misogyny, racism, and internalized homophobia that motivate his counternormativity. On one hand, Bersani has an important critique to make in his third chapter, but he deflects his ar-

gument from its obvious conclusion by essentializing the sexual difference of his gay daddies. Gay studies, Bersani implies through his speculations about S/M, needs to stop trying to validate itself by imputing to lesbigay identities a higher moral logic. Such a proclivity toward self-justification keeps gay studies locked into a reactionary stance against heterosexist society without really, as Michael Warner argues in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, trying to overturn and reorganize normative heterosexist values (xxi): "today's climate of moral self-congratulation ...pits our own caring and nurturing queer selves against a vicious heterosexist community" (107). However, rather than exposing the coercion *within any monolithic* gay identity—and thus trying to move gay politics beyond its obsession with ideas of identity and culture—Bersani only substitutes his own version of our higher character. While white gay men should refuse a specificity based on a touchy-feeling (lesbian) notion of reciprocity and mutuality, Bersani still wants to confer on "homo-ness" a political value as some higher rebellion. Bersani's valorizing of "homo-ness" reinscribes the traditional gendered split between the public and private spheres of influence. In contrast to feminist critics, Bersani does not want to recast homosexuality as a rearrangement of private relations. Instead, he will enfranchise gay white men by giving them a masculine public role: their visibility will be an ultimate rejection of bourgeois models of mental health and social order. Bersani preserves a specific version of homosexuality (his version as opposed to that of the male feminists) because he wants to enunciate it (often for good reason) as an ideological critique of social power.

However, in attempting to substitute a culturally marginalized sexual practice as a sociological alternative to the mainstream, Bersani evacuates lesbigay studies of its "queerness." In its attention to the unstable and openended dynamics of desire, queer theory opens up representations to the ongoing process of both re-articulation and transformation. Bernani, on the other hand, would close off this process before it fully betrays white male privilege. Bersani's attempts to fix an ideal gay identity that would position women and minorities outside its masculinist autoerotic economy points to a need within the lesbigay community—as Caroline Anne Tyler suggests in a recent study of "passing"—for a critical consciousness about how the lesbigay's own alternative models of identity might themselves be "oppressive" (224). If "coming out" demands a doubling of the self in the image of the other, what would it mean to imagine a subjectivity without such subjection? While interrogating the cultural fiction of heterosexuality, Bersani fails to escape normative habits of thinking to propose a truly queer society.

Even if we accept the strategic value of holding onto a gay identity, and this I feel is a dubious claim, Bersani's "homo-ness" will hardly correct or ameliorate the inequalities of a heterosexist society. And indeed, Bersani never meant for it to revolutionize society (or to revolu-

tionize society in any way different from the right-wing homophobes in Congress). In his *Village Voice* review, Dale Peck described Bersani as a "conservative" because of his "nihilism" (21). But Bersani is more particularly a conservative libertarian without any real social vision who dreams of a community where relations are no longer held hostage, as he puts it, to the demands for an intimate knowledge of the other. In his long final chapter, the "Sexual Outlaw," Bersani figures himself as a nineties pioneer of sexual freedom. But although posing as a reincarnated Rechy who wants to remove residual moralisms, Bersani attempts to snuff out multiculturalism in gay jouissance. In this final chapter, Bersani discloses that if he would salvage a gay presence as a behavioral model in the disruption of social power, he hopes to undermine what remains of the progressive left, not the heterosexual mainstream.

In a convoluted argument against the intersubjective formation of identity, Bersani repeats what Lee Edelman has called in *Homographesis* a homophobic fear of penetration by the other. Bersani's homo is really a gay Emersonian scholar who, in his sublime egotism, believes in the fantasy of an original and asocial self. In his defense of this narcissistic self freed from sociality, Bersani blinkers himself from nearly every recent critical school which has situated the self in a dialectical flux with its culture. Desire is not based on a longing for the ideal self which we lack, so Bersani argues, but on a wish for sameness, since, in an intimate relation with others different from ourselves, we feel constrained to perform their image of us (143). Filtering ontology through stereotypical male fears of commitment, Bersani insists that freedom is only possible in guilt-free anonymous sexuality. "Homo-ness" is a "desire to repeat, to expand, to intensify the same" of our self (149).

Now if Bersani just left "homo-ness" as a gay specificity, we might simply remark that he transvalues the traditional psychoanalytic stigma of gay men as narcissists into an odd source of pride. But the "anti-relationality inherent in all 'homo-ness'" Bersani would urge as the basis of a revolutionary redefinition of society as a whole (164). While many might be persuaded by Bersani's Utopia of arelativity because it promises a return to a pre-AIDs world of non-apologetic sexuality, we should not fail to detect the white supremacism beneath the liberationist rhetoric. Bersani doesn't just want to free sex from prescriptions, but white men from empathetic identification with women and minorities. When Bersani speaks of the freedom possible only when one ignores the subjectivity of the other, he is defending the colonialist as much as the sexual outlaw. The unconscious fear that drives Bersani's elaborate rationalizations of narcissism stems from an angry awareness that recent trends toward postcolonial and multicultural studies represent a new form of discipline for gay and straight white men. In a world where white men are forced to recognize the self-authorized identities of Afri-

can-Americans, Asians, and Latinos, white men can no longer displace their own selves onto the other with impunity. Within Bersani's revolutionized society based on a refusal of relationality, white men could indulge their nostalgic fantasy for a white male radicalism, could return to the days of Mailer's hip White Negroes, and objectify without guilt.

Thus, it might be argued, Bersani's *Homos* is a significant work not because of its conclusions, but because of its audacity in foregrounding the problems which face gay studies as it competes with postcolonialism for institutional power and recognition. Bersani's *Homos* illustrates for us the paucity of a liberationist politics based on racial paradigms of identity and culture. Lesbigay rights has always been indebted to the sixties Civil Rights protests and modeled its discourse after nationalistic black and Latino power movements. But the continued insistence on gayness as a singular identity formation can only further fragment our community into lesbian, bisexual, transgenderal, and gay male camps so that all of us are rendered vulnerable to the demonizing rhetoric of the right and all of us are relegated back into invisibility. Bersani's continued obsession with codifying gayness according to whatever is currently fashionable as the "outside" of culture will only lead to further ridiculous, if not dangerous, macho posturing. What Bersani (as well as many within lesbigay studies) cannot accept is the recent insight of postcolonialism and queer theory that gayness has always been a fluid signifier whose meaning arises within a dialogic relation with mainstream society *and with our ethnic and racial brothers and sisters*.

In *Homos*, Bersani tells his white male readers that they don't have to share cultural agency. As minorities and women acquire continued power within the gay community to represent the values of their self-ascribed identities, white gay men will have to (as Bersani is well aware) alter their values and ultimately "transform their identities in relation to the critical pushes and pulls" of this transformative incorporation (Goldberg 221). However, by bootlegging erotic determinism back into gay studies under the name of Freud, Bersani seeks to stifle this incorporation and prevent white gay men from having to renegotiate their control over the cultural definition of gayness. If "homo-ness" is not socially constructed, if it is arelational and narcissistic, as Bersani argues, white gay men can ignore the need for social justice and equality for all of our lesbian sisters and non-white gay brothers as well as the pressures toward cultural compromise. Despite his sexual orientation, Bersani may find (it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say) his most ardent homos among the white militia.

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