

HOMOS

♦

Leo Bersani

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

1995

Prologue: "We"

No one wants to be called a homosexual. The revulsion that designation would inspire in a Christian fundamentalist is understandable. Given the pressures and privileges intrinsic to the position one occupies on the great homo-heterosexual divide in our society, we can also appreciate the anxiety, on the part of those straights most openly sympathetic with gay causes, not to be themselves mistaken for one of those whose rights they commendably defend. It is even possible to sympathize with all the closeted gay men and lesbians who fear, rightly or wrongly, personal and professional catastrophe were they to be exposed as homosexuals. Much more mystifying is the aversion to "homosexuality" on the part of self-identified homosexual activists and theorists. Not only that: those I have in mind, far from

proposing merely lexical substitutions (gay or queer, say, instead of homosexual), are also insisting that their chosen self-designations no longer designate the reality we might assume to be indissolubly connected to whatever term is used. For the interested but theoretically uninitiated observer of today's cultural scene, it may come as something of an epistemological shock to learn, from Monique Wittig, that "it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women"; or, from Judith Butler, that the only thing lesbians have in common is a knowledge of how homophobia works against women; or, from Michael Warner, that queerness is characterized by a determined "resistance to regimes of the normal."¹ These assertions, made by three of the most original writers working today on questions of sexuality and gender, suggest a definitional crisis. Is the "homophobic lesbian" an oxymoron? And since we have all known men who lust for other men while otherwise feeling quite comfortable with "regimes of the normal," is *queer* now to be taken as delineating political rather than erotic tendencies? No longer would a boy discover that, whether he likes it or not, he is queer; indeed, all of us—even after decades of what we thought of as extravagant sexual confirmation of our queerness—would have to earn the right to that designation and to the dignity it now confers.

In much of this book I will be arguing that these reformulations should be both welcomed and resisted. Although it would be easy to discuss them as evidence of a paranoid distrust of all self-identifying moves, there are excellent historical reasons for such distrust. The elaborating of certain erotic preferences into a "char-

acter"—into a kind of erotically determined essence—can never be a disinterested scientific enterprise. The attempted stabilizing of identity is inherently a disciplinary project. Panoptic vision depends on a successful immobilizing of the human objects it surveys, and, in an argument made familiar by Michel Foucault, sexuality now provides the principal categories for a strategic transformation of behavior into manipulatable characteristic types. Once "the homosexual" and "the heterosexual" were seen as primary examples of such types, it was perhaps inevitable that any effort to enclose human subjects within clearly delimited and coherent identities would become suspect.

While conceived as an act of resistance to homophobic oppression, the project of elaborating a gay identity could itself be discredited. For hasn't that identity been exclusionary, delineating what is easily recognizable as a white, middle-class, liberal gay identity? And wasn't the delineating act itself a sign, or rather an intellectual symptom, of the very class it described? Merely looking for a gay identity predetermined the field in which it would be found, since the leisured activity of looking characterized the identity it sought to uncover. "Gay identity" led many of those invited to recognize themselves as belonging to it (as well as those excluded) to protest that there are many ways of being gay, that sexual behavior is never only a question of sex, that it is embedded in all the other, nonsexual ways in which we are socially and culturally positioned. An intentionally oppositional gay identity, by its very coherence, only repeats the restrictive and immobilizing analyses it set out to resist.

Even more: why should sexual preference be the key to identity in the first place? And, more fundamentally, why should preference itself be understood only as a function of the homo-heterosexual dyad? That dyad imprisons the eroticized body within a rigidly gendered sexuality, in which pleasure is at once recognized and legitimized as a function of genital differences between the sexes. Finally, as Warner has noted, in such a system gender difference becomes "a sign of the irreducible phenomenological difference between persons."² The portentous consequences of buying into the "homosexual" designation should now be clear: that term is a central piece in the profoundly biased cultural education we receive in sameness and difference—that is, in our self-forming perceptions of where we end and others begin, and where and how the frictions of otherness block the expansion of our selves.

And yet, if these suspicions of identity are necessary, they are not necessarily liberating. Gay men and lesbians have nearly disappeared into their sophisticated awareness of how they have been constructed as gay men and lesbians. The discrediting of a specific gay identity (and the correlative distrust of etiological investigations into homosexuality) has had the curious but predictable result of eliminating the indispensable grounds for resistance to, precisely, hegemonic regimes of the normal. We have erased ourselves in the process of denaturalizing the epistemic and political regimes that have constructed us. The power of those systems is only minimally contested by demonstrations of their "merely" historical character. They don't need to be natural in order to rule; to demystify them doesn't render them inoperative. If many gays now reject a homo-

sexual identity as it has been elaborated for gays by others, the dominant heterosexual society doesn't need our belief in its own naturalness in order to continue exercising and enjoying the privileges of dominance. Suspicious of our own enforced identity, we are reduced to playing subversively with normative identities—attempting, for example, to "resignify" the family for communities that defy the usual assumptions about what constitutes a family. These efforts, while valuable, can have assimilative rather than subversive consequences; having de-gayed themselves, gays melt into the culture they like to think of themselves as undermining. Or, having "realistically" abandoned what one queer theorist calls a "millennial vision" of domination's demise,³ we resign ourselves to the micropolitics of local struggles for participatory democracy and social justice, thus revealing political ambitions about as stirring as those reflected on the bumper stickers that enjoin us to "think globally" and "act locally."

De-gaying gayness can only fortify homophobic oppression; it accomplishes in its own way the principal aim of homophobia: the elimination of gays. The consequence of self-erasure is . . . self-erasure. Even a provisional acceptance of the very categories elaborated by dominant identitarian regimes might more effectively undermine those forces than a simple disappearing act. For example, the category of homosexuality—even as it has been homophobically cultivated—includes within it an indeterminacy and a mobility inimical to the disciplinary designs facilitated by the assignment of stable identities. Furthermore, gay critiques of homosexual identity have generally been *desexualizing* discourses. You would never know, from most of the works I dis-

discuss, that gay men, for all their diversity, share a strong sexual interest in other human beings anatomically identifiable as male. Even recent attempts in queer theory to make sexuality “a primary category for social analysis”⁴ has merely added another category to the analysis of social institutions (making explicit the prescriptive assumptions about sexuality embedded within institutions) rather than trying to trace the political productivity of the sexual. As I have written elsewhere, though it is indisputably true that sexuality is always being politicized, the ways in which *having sex* politicizes can be highly problematic.⁵ How, for example, does a gay man’s erotic joy in the penis inflect, or endanger, what he might like to think of as his insubordinate relation to the paternal phallus? In what ways does that joy both qualify and fortify his investment in the Law, in patriarchal structures of dominance and submission he might prefer to think of himself as only subverting?

It is perhaps unfortunate, but no less true, that we have *learned to desire from within the heterosexual norms and gendered structures that we can no longer think of as natural, or as exhausting all the options for self-identification*. Since deconstructing an imposed identity will not erase the habit of desire, it might be more profitable to test the resistance of the identity from *within the desire*. Although there are valid grounds for questioning the assumption that desire between men, or between women, is desire for “the same,” it is also true that because our apprenticeship in desiring takes place within that assumption, homosexuality can become a privileged model of sameness—one that makes manifest not the limits but the inestimable value of

relations of sameness, of homo-relations. Perhaps inherent in gay desire is a revolutionary inaptitude for heterozed sociality. This of course means sociality as we know it, and the most politically disruptive aspect of the homo-ness I will be exploring in gay desire is a redefinition of sociality so radical that it may appear to require a provisional withdrawal from relationality itself.

This difficult project will be ventured in Chapter 4 through works by Gide, Proust, and Genet, a discussion that should be thought of not as a more or less enjoyable addendum of literary criticism to the arguments made in the rest of this book but, instead, as absolutely crucial to the persuasiveness of those arguments. The writers I discuss are—in sharp contrast to contemporary gay and lesbian theorists—drawn to the *anticonformitarian* impulses they discover in homosexual desire. For them, otherness is articulated as relay stations in a process of self-extension. Far removed from our own theoretical debates, *The Immoralist*, *Sodom et Gomorrah*, and *Funeral Rites* are nonetheless relevant to those debates in demonstrating how desire for the same can free us from an oppressive psychology of desire as lack (a psychology that grounds sociality in trauma and castration). New reflection on homo-ness could lead us to a salutary devalorizing of difference—or, more exactly, to a notion of difference not as a trauma to be overcome (a view that, among other things, nourishes antagonistic relations between the sexes), but rather as a nonthreatening supplement to sameness.

I discover, in rereading myself, that I have become an ambiguous “we”—a fact I both welcome and find somewhat troubling. Who are these others I repeatedly add

to myself? If they share my own identity as a white, relatively prosperous gay man, they obviously constitute a limited subject—and, by no means incidentally, a limited group of readers. But there is no getting away from that identity, although to judge from the apologetic tone with which many of my white, relatively prosperous gay brothers in Academia refer to the racial and economic place they speak from, *they* at least can't be faulted for not trying. Everything I say is affected by the perspective that various circumstances have given me on whatever I say or do. It would be embarrassing to announce such an obvious truth were it not for the suspicion—by no means unfounded—that privileged white males tend to speak as if their assertions had some natural universality, taking place above the field of particular perspectives. At a gay and lesbian conference where I read part of Chapter 3, a lesbian colleague complained that my talk marginalized women. Since much of what I said had to do with gay men's sexuality and, more specifically, with gay men's love of the cock, her entirely accurate comment became entirely puzzling when voiced as a complaint. Why not object, more directly, to my talking about gay male sexuality at all? I wasn't necessarily "better" on gay male desire than she might have been on the same subject, and it is even conceivable that I might have been more acute than she if my topic had been lesbian sexuality. In any case, it is undeniable that my talk that day enjoyed, as it were, an explicit correspondence with my own sexual perspective and that *any* perspective, direct or vicarious, would be to some extent exclusionary.

Rather than deny or apologize for such exclusions,

we might more profitably acknowledge them and then try to see the unexpected ways in which an unavoidably limited "I" or "we" also speaks outside its particular perspective. My "we" in this book is constantly crossing over into the territory of other "we's." If I am resolutely excluded from lesbian sexuality in referring to the penis as a conscious source of erotic stimulation, lesbians, I would hope, will recognize themselves in a more socially positioned first-person plural—the "we" alluding to both gay men and lesbians as targets of homophobic aggression. I would also like to assume that, in spite of the enormous diversity among gay men, and taking into account the considerable historical variation in the very meaning of homosexual or gay, a black, economically disadvantaged gay man will find what I say about the homo-ness of gay men in Genet resonant with his own experience. The most varied, even antagonistic, identities meet transversely. These intersections of divergent lines of identity and experience give a pleasing instability to the "we" of this book. The instability, as readers will quickly recognize, is also intellectual: the positions I question have had considerable influence on my thinking about identity and sexuality, and so—theoretically as well as racially or economically—my "we" frequently defines a perspective that is at once mine and not mine.

This mobility should create a kind of community, one that can never be settled, whose membership is always shifting. It is also a community in which many straights should be able to find a place. Identity and sexual politics are not issues defined by particular sexual preferences. Still, many readers will find it useful to

have an introduction to the particular gay contexts in which I discuss these issues. So I begin with an occasionally journalistic overview of “the gay presence” in America, which some of my gay readers may find unnecessary but which should help those less absorbed in today’s queer scene to appreciate the irony in what I later speak of as “the gay absence.” Furthermore, though I want to encourage thinking about gay specificity, I do not want to contribute to gay groupiness. The very people who object to being confined within a gay identity have formed a kind of ghetto of their own, based on the assumed superiority of queer culture to what is stigmatized as compulsory heterosexuality. If homosexuality is a privileged vehicle for homo-ness, the latter designates a mode of connectedness to the world that it would be absurd to reduce to sexual preference. An anticomunal mode of connectedness we might all share, or a new way of coming together: that, and not assimilation into already constituted communities, should be the goal of any adventure in bringing out, and celebrating, “the homo” in all of us.

1

The Gay Presence

Never before have gay men and women been so visible. If, as the citizens of Queer Nation have proclaimed, “we are everywhere,” this should be understood as more than a defiant response to those who would sequester or, better, eradicate us; indeed, homophobic America itself appears to have an insatiable appetite for our presence. As a result, the social project inherent in the nineteenth-century invention of “the homosexual” can perhaps now be realized: visibility is a precondition of surveillance, disciplinary intervention, and, at the limit, gender-cleansing. The classification into character types of how people imagine and pursue their bodies’ pleasures greatly reduced the heterogeneity of erotic behavior. A psychology of desire, as Foucault forcefully argued, drew those readable psychic maps on which human

LEO BERSANI

Is the Rectum a Grave?
and Other Essays

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS • CHICAGO AND LONDON