

A View From Behind: Matrixiality, Masculinity, Queer Theory

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A sexuality, therefore, that is not, at least not in the first instance, determined as hetero- or homosexual, as vaginal or anal, as human (or indeed animal) or prosthetic, not even as embracing or penetrating but which implies before all else a coupling with otherness.¹

David Wills, *Dorsality: Thinking Back through Technology and Politics*

This article considers how Bracha L. Ettinger's *The Matrixial Borderspace* (2006) complements, challenges and possibly extends topical discourses and critical approaches within queer theory. The emphasis in *The Matrixial Borderspace* on 'subjectivity as encounter occurring at shared-border spaces'² shares much in common with queer theory projects that aim to destabilize Oedipal logic through emphasizing notions of affect, sensation, becoming, textuality, potentiality and so on; many of which draw upon the psychoanalytic-philosophical riffs of Deleuze and Guattari, for example. While the book, and prefacing remarks of Judith Butler and Griselda Pollock insist that the concept of the matrixial (Latin for womb) does not essentialize 'the feminine' or 'femininity' on biological grounds, and that the matrixial does not seek to overthrow the phallic principle, but 'surf[s] beneath/beside' it³, the 'archaic intrauterine unities of the maternal body' become the starting point for imagining subjectivity as encounter between 'several co-affecting partial-subjectivities that are never entirely used or totally lost'⁴.

In developing a theory of the matrixial, Sigmund Freud's paper on 'The "Uncanny"' (1919) is revitalized⁵. Although Freud recognized the force of the denial of feminine specificity in this paper, and linked it to the necessary narcissism of every child, *The Matrixial Borderspace* argues for a feminine specificity grounded in those same intrauterine fantasies. Another key point of departure is Lacan's seminar on the *sinthôme* (Seminar XX) in which he maintains that the sexual non-relation is the result of phallic equivalence between the sexes⁶. *The Matrixial Borderspace* questions this ostensible deadlock, arguing for a non-

equivalence that is beyond (before and beside) the phallus. This leads the book to consider a non-castratory form of repression, which is ‘beyond repression and foreclosure,’⁷ that returns as a ghostly trace or flash, like the image of Eurydice - neither fully here, nor there.

That we have all passed through the mother’s body gives the theory its valence, yet the architecture is such that different sexes - male and female - experience the matrix differently:

Female subjects have double access to the matrixial sphere in the Real because they experience the womb both as an archaic out-site and past-side – out of chronological times as “anterior” (this is true for males as well) - *and* as an inside and future-side – as an actual future, and “posterior” time (whether they are mothers or not). [...]male subjects are more radically split from this archaic space and time of potentiality because their relation with it in the Real remains forever in the archaic and totally-outside and too-early that it is forever-too-late to access. Female subjects have a privileged access to the paradoxical time, the matrixial time, where the future traumatically meets the past, as well as to the paradoxical matrixial space where the outside meets the inside. Males however, like women, are in contact with this time and space through compassionate joining-in difference with others in transference relations, and via art-objects, art-gestures, such as music, painting, and dance.⁸

What interests me in this passage is how male potentiality and phallic circum-navigability in particular are conceptualized within matrixial logic. Rather than questioning a theory which is self-knowingly grounded in sexual specificity, and in order to create dialogue between it and dominant strands of queer theory, I would like to look at points of contact between the uterus and the anus as they are imagined in Ettinger’s text, and as they figure in the more homo-centric writings of queer literary and cultural theorists Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, and Calvin Thomas.

In *Homos* (1995) Bersani argues for a gay specificity that might resist generalizing notions that accompany terms such as ‘queer,’ citing Michael Warner’s definition in *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993) that frames queerness as ‘resistant to regimes of the normal.’⁹ Bersani writes: ‘This generous definition pits all resisters in the same queer bag – a universalizing move I appreciate but that fails to specify the sexual distinctiveness of the resistance.’¹⁰ He goes on, ‘[U]niversal homo-ness can allay the terror of difference, which generally gives rise to a hopeless dream of eliminating sexual difference entirely. A massively heteroized

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perception of the universe gives urgency to a narcissistic project that would reduce - radically, with no surplus of alterity – the other to the same.’¹¹

Bersani’s writing in *Homos, Forms of Being* (2004) and most recently in *intimacies* (2008, co-authored with Adam Phillips) shares similar ethical concerns as Ettinger’s work, and many of her words resonate, co-poetically, with Bersani’s; especially when writing about dissolution, potentiality, transformational shimmers and the beauty of aesthetics¹². But unlike matrixial space, where theory and art-work are elevated, in Bersani’s model sex and aesthetics are both privileged modes of self-divestiture - which is also a precedent to becoming - and both share a role in moving beyond the phallus and Oedipal relationality, albeit via the same organ.

Like Ettinger too, Bersani warns of the dangers of despecification to ethical formations. In *intimacies*, he discusses the role of barebacking¹³ as the practice or rehearsal for a kind of impersonal intimacy – a connectedness without ego foreclosure which debases the sacrificial, phallic model of masculinity - which would participate in the kind of non-violent border-linking that the matrixial implies, although it would be grounded in a sexual and sexualized relationship¹⁴. He writes ‘I call this love impersonal narcissism because the self the subject sees reflected in the other is not the unique personality central to modern notions of individualism.’¹⁵ This notion develops the point forwarded in *Homos* where he asks us to consider a ‘nonsuicidal disappearance of the subject, or to disassociate masochism from the death drive’¹⁶. And so, while ‘fragility’ seems to constitute the affective subject of the matrixial encounter, a more obviously ‘sexualized’ and ‘eroticized’ tension constitutes the subject-in-becoming/dissolution of Bersanian *ébranlement*.¹⁷

For Bersani, anal sex, especially between men, is valuable in so far as it ‘demean[s] the seriousness of efforts to redeem it [...] where the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared – differently – by men and women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death’¹⁸. For Lee Edelman, in his studies of Hitchcock, the anus represents the cut of castration, of phallic repression, of unregenerating, unproductive sexuality associated with queerness.¹⁹ And for Calvin Thomas, reading Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* and *Spellbound* in *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory: Essays on Abjection in Literature, Mass Culture and Film* (2008), Lacan’s

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theory of the impossible sexual relation might be compensated, as it is in Samuel Beckett's writing, by 'directing the leading men along the avenue of analism to an alternative altar and different sort of heterosexual success, a success that succeeds normative heterosexuality while remaining, albeit queerly, heterosexual'²⁰.

The anus features in Ettinger's text too, but in less favourable terms on account of Freud's cloacal theory of birth, in which he presents the child's disavowal of the womb as birth-site, in favour of the anus, along the lines of 'if babies are born through the anus, then man can give birth just as well as a woman?'²¹ Ettinger points out that this reading assumes a 'universal' male child who, in wanting every 'valuable organ,' sees the womb as a catastrophe to narcissism: 'Why should it deny the womb' she asks 'and also ignore its value for any subject, and more specifically for female development and narcissism?'²² Of course, there is no good or ethical reason why the womb should be denied, although whether the womb or anus would be the (imagined) site of birth seems to be more urgent only if the phantasy is in fact engendered by a phallogocentric repression of women's bodies and the maternal, rather than as a result of some other kind of phantasmic cross-identification. From a queer perspective, one might say that it matters less whether we imagine that we come from the womb, the anus, both holes or any hole, than it matters how certain bodies are eroticized, potentialised, and signified by normative regimes that designate orificial specificity.

Thinking queerly, then – beside, around, and crucially behind the theorist's whose work I have touched upon - I wonder where or how sexual practice, rather than sexual relations, might figure in or encounter the matrixial? I also wonder if we might see sex, in all its possible perverse, unregenerating, unproductive forms, to resemble the kind of art-work of which Ettinger writes? How might sexual practice reinvent itself to become matrixial sex, and within such an encounter, would male-male sex be twice removed from matrixial becoming, doubly out-site/past-side? Or, does the matrixial challenge dominant strands of queer thought to rethink the distinction between sex acts and what Ettinger understood as 'the sexual'?

Finally then, if *The Matrixial Borderspace* and queer theory have anything to share, particularly as it moves within the homo-centric work of Bersani, Edelman, and Thomas – or Tim Dean, for that matter²³; it would seem to me that the uterus and anus, rather than the

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uterus and the phallus, are be the central organs of contention - negotiating a problem that revolves around art-work and sex-work.

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¹ David Wills, *Dorsality: Thinking Back through Technology and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 12.

² Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 2.

³ Griselda Pollock (Foreword) in Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, The 'Uncanny' (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII (1917-1919), pp. 217-256

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX Encore* (1975), (London and New York: WW Norton, 1999)

⁷ Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p. 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.142.

⁹ Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xxvi.

¹⁰ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.146.

¹² Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London, British Film Institute, 2004)

¹³ 'Barebacking' refers to unprotected anal sex between man

¹⁴ Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *intimacies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁶ Leo Bersani, *Homos*, p. 99.

¹⁷ See Bersani's reading of this term, following that of Laplanche, in *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 38.

¹⁸ Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*

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(Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 197-222; (p. 222).

¹⁹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 35.

²⁰ Calvin Thomas, *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory: Essays on Abjection in Literature, Mass Culture and Film* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 127.

²¹ See Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p. 173 and Freud, 'On The Sexual Theories of Children' (1908), *The Standard Edition IX*, p. 219.

²² Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p. 175.

²³ See, for example, Dean's writing on unprotected anal sex between men in *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).