

Deconstruction

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.

—*Homos* 6

*F*or many theorists of gender and sexuality trained in the tradition of deconstruction, the recognition that an identity has no material ground but is, rather, “imposed” is a crucial first step in breaking the rigid kernels of habit that stymie social and political change. Deconstruct the fantasy of an identity’s solidity—reveal its basis in the dynamism of discourse—and all that feels solid melts into air. Indeed, this might be the founding premise of queer theory itself, a field that has sought to transform the very fabric of society by revealing what appear to be fixed and unchanging identities to be malleable, discursive constructs. Why, then, should we follow Bersani in maintaining, as he does in the little clause above, that deconstruction “will not” do what it says it does: deconstruct?¹

In *Homos*, Bersani substantiates this somewhat controversial claim, among other ways, through a critical engagement with Judith Butler’s influential account of drag in her books *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*. In the latter, the gender-bending performances documented in Jennie Livingston’s film *Paris Is Burning* are cited as evidence that drag reveals the inherent fiction of gender.² In his counterreading of the film,

Bersani emphasizes the extent to which drag invests in the structure it is said to deconstruct: “resignification cannot destroy,” he argues there, maintaining that the “mimetic activities” of those seen in the film “are too closely imbricated in the norms they continue” to overthrow anything (51).³ Anyone who has screened *Paris Is Burning* in a queer studies classroom in recent years will have witnessed at least one of their students react with horror at Venus Extravaganza’s earnest desire to “be a spoiled, rich white girl” (*Paris*), a desire they are quick to find problematic. This is not Bersani’s point. Rather, his reading of the film flips such moralizing reactions on their head at the same time that it resists the more recuperative reading undertaken by Butler: the normative desires that are a “problem” for certain queer politics are endemic not to society, but to the structure of desire itself, which Bersani describes in the above-cited quotation as a “habit.” To reveal the socially constructed nature of an identity will not necessarily result in the alteration of the “habit of desire” that constitutes that identity, he says. But what exactly does Bersani mean with the phrase “habit of desire”? And why would it be “more profitable to test the resistance of the identity from within the desire”?

Let us step back nine years to Bersani’s 1986 *The Freudian Body*. Here we find a Bersani simultaneously both more and less deconstructive—a Bersani, on the one hand, more invested in what he calls the “subversive” power of language (a word he uses with some frequency prior to the publication of *Gender Trouble*), and yet, on the other hand, a Bersani deeply skeptical that desire, particularly its tendency (whatever its object) to unbind itself, belongs to anything other than, as he puts it bluntly, “the nonlinguistic biology of human life” (40). Mostly though, he is honest about the role this tension plays in his own, psychoanalytically informed project: “Is a psychoanalytic reflection on desire—a reflection at once paralyzed, madly excessive, and irreducibly paradoxical—compatible with the practice of discipline, with a reeducation of human desire?” he asks in the introduction (*Freudian* 5). Can talking about something, can analyzing something, change it? What to do, moreover, with the conflict, inherent to psychoanalysis itself, between the description of the structure of desire (its normative aspect) and the attempt to change the harmful habits that desire settles into (its therapeutic aspect)? As various deconstructive readings of Freud have emphasized, including not only that of Butler but that of Bersani too, Freud’s narrativization of gender and sexuality as achievements—ideals installed in the body as a result of the psychic dynamics of the Oedipus complex—rather than inborn traits enables a critique of the cultural practices through which boys and girls,

heterosexuals and homosexuals, are made (and made to appear natural and inevitable). And yet, in grounding desire itself in the nonlinguistic and even, at times, the biological, Bersani puts pressure on the deconstructive tendency to understand the body and its impulses as entirely discursively constructed.

He does so, first, by insisting that not everything falls within the purview of deconstruction, an academic practice that often establishes its authority by insisting that nothing exists beyond what it alone is equipped to analyze. The deconstructionist might have excellent knowledge of the workings of discourse, and as such, language and culture, but why should this knowledge trump everything? In an interview from 1998, Bersani recalls “talking to one of my colleagues, soon after the AIDS epidemic broke out, who said only deconstructionists could really understand the immune system” (“Beyond” 191). Such a comment strikes Bersani as “an idiocy not to be believed” from “someone acknowledged to be a quite brilliant so-called deconstructionist.” What seems to perturb Bersani about the hubris of this particular theorist is not that a humanist might claim to have better knowledge of the body than a scientist, but that the speaker implicitly believes that his knowledge supersedes that of all others. “I find it very irritating,” Bersani remarks, “that people in the intellectual or academic world think of themselves as that different in what they’re doing from what other people are doing.” Far from dismissing deconstruction (or academic work generally), what Bersani seems to encourage here is reflection on the epistemological limits of particular methods of analysis, at the same time that he views them all as a kind of work. Not every kind of thought can explain everything. One thing that eludes the grasp of deconstruction (especially as it would come to inform the queer theoretical project of concern to Bersani) is what he calls “the ontology of sexuality” (*Freudian* 40).

The Freudian Body is the most insistent on this point, while at the same time, as I indicated previously, borrowing tools from deconstruction in its thinking about language and signification. A particular focus of Bersani’s analysis here is the historicity of sexuality, a topic that would go on to inspire much work in queer studies throughout the ’90s and early 2000s. Skeptical about the totalizing impulse of this new trend, Bersani suggests that it is worth conceptually distinguishing between the ontology of sexuality and its history (rather than, say, subordinating the former to the latter, or, worse yet, insisting that the latter reveals the former to be a myth). He writes, “[T]he ontology of sexuality is unrelated to its historical development. Sexuality manifests itself in a variety of sexual acts *and* in a

variety of presumably nonsexual acts, but its constitutive *excitement* is the same in the loving copulation between two adults, the thrashing of a boundlessly submissive slave by his pitiless master, and the masturbation of the fetishist carried away by an ardently fondled silver slipper” (*Freudian* 40). This is a stunning passage, one that sits uncomfortably with the faith in the genealogical method that animates the work of the theorist to whom *The Freudian Body* is dedicated and to whom *Homos* is described as an “ambivalent response,” Michel Foucault. According to Bersani, sexual excitement operates, indeed *is*, the same whether you’re a loving couple, a sex slave, or a masturbating foot fetishist. What’s more, it was the same then as it is now: “Sexuality,” he continues, “is the atemporal substratum of sex” (40). Such a view flies in the face of those who would maintain that the extent to which one historicizes an identity correlates nearly precisely to one’s commitment to anti-essentialism: “A political genealogy of gender ontologies,” Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*, notably one of the earliest texts to insist on the surprising compatibility of Freud and Foucault, “if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender” (44). To reveal an identity to be composed of “acts” rather than something more “substantive”—as a “successful” genealogy will do—will reveal the “possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed” in such “contingent ontologies.” This is because what looks like ontology is history in disguise: “the ‘being’ of gender is an effect” of historically mediated institutions, practices, discourses (45).

Perhaps, then, another reason why the deconstruction of an identity will not “erase the habit of desire” is that for Bersani the ontology of sexuality is actually atemporal. Does not Bersani, a thinker who, rather than historicizing homosexual identity, defines it with regard to a particular structural relation to sameness (a “homo-narcissism breaks down ego boundaries instead of reinforcing them”), risk the biological essentialism that generations of queer theorists and deconstructive thinkers more broadly have worked to undermine (“Is the Rectum?” 35)?⁴ Indeed he does insofar as, following Freud, he grounds the desire for a shattering of the boundary between self and other in the materiality of the body itself, writing in the passage that I quoted in part earlier, and which I now quote in full, “We desire what nearly shatters us, and the shattering experience is, it would seem, *without any specific content*—which may be our only way of saying that the experience cannot be said, that it belongs to the nonlinguistic biology of human life” (*Freudian* 40). I will propose, however, that it is ultimately

the structuralism of Bersani's theory of desire that undoes the second-level essentialism that some deconstructive theories of sexuality fall back on when they institute an opposition between identities falsely perceived to have a substance and their deconstructed parodies, which reveal these identities to be founded on nothing at all.

One might even argue that such a distinction between (false, physical) appearance and (true, discursive) reality is the metaphysical ground on which new queer moralism stands—an ethical stance in which the self-conscious openness of “queer” is elevated against the unthinking rigidity of heterosexuality: “In today's climate of moral self-congratulation,” Bersani writes, already over it in 1995, “which pits our own caring and nurturing queer selves against a vicious heterosexist community, nothing could be more unwelcome than the Proustian suggestion that the struggle for power unleashed by sexual desire may not be entirely the consequence of inequitable social arrangements but is a rather nasty aspect of the inescapable resistance the world opposes to our equally inescapable invasive projects” (*Homos* 108). Here again, as in the passage in which Bersani distinguishes between the ontology of sexuality and its history, a universalizing structuralism takes the place of a relativizing (yet hierarchizing) deconstructivism. The upshot this time, however, is ethical in nature: queer desire is just as exclusionary as straight. While certainly not all desire is discriminatory, it might be worth reflecting on the shared basis of our desire in discrimination, that is, the preference for one over another. The next sentence in this passage calls for “a theory of love based not on our assertions of how different and how much better we are than those who would do away with us (because we are neither that different nor that much better), but one that would instead be grounded in the very contradictions, impossibilities, and antagonisms brought to light by any serious genealogy of desire.” A “serious genealogy of desire” (compare here Butler's “successful” “genealogy of gender ontologies” cited earlier) would result not in that ever unsurprising conclusion—that heterosexuality and the gender binary it turns on are more ethically specious than those sexual and gender formations that “subvert” them—but rather in the attempt to account for the tensions that *all* subjects experience when their desires confront the “resistance” of the world.

In the passage just discussed, it is the world that is resistant. In the passage that inspires this essay, resistance instead characterizes the object of Bersani's proposed method: that is, “to test the resistance of the identity from within the desire.” Testing the resistance of something typically involves applying incrementally greater force to it in order to see how

much pressure it can take before it deforms or breaks. The aim of such a test is not to destroy the thing (at least not destruction per se), but rather to produce *knowledge of the thing through knowledge of its limits*. It might be said that Bersani's entire career has been dedicated to testing the resistance of the identity that is homosexuality, an identity that (one cannot be reminded enough) is structurally no different from heterosexuality in its being exclusionary, though the content and method of its exclusions are different. The aim of such a test, again, is not to deconstruct (e.g., by revealing hetero- or homosexuality to have no ground whatsoever), but rather to understand what constitutes the thing by observing at what point it becomes something else. What are the limits of homosexuality? If sexual identity is irreducible to sexual acts, and we do not wish to fall back on self-report as its only measure, what can be said to characterize it? Rather than get into the complex relay of sameness and difference that defines Bersani's concept of "homo-ness," in what remains of this short essay I will stay on the level of structure to ask what constitutes the "habit of desire" that Bersani believes resists the deconstruction of any identity—heterosexual, homosexual, or otherwise. To do so, I take yet one more step back in Bersani's corpus to his 1965 study, *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art*, a book in which the concept of habit emerges as the keystone for testing the resistance not only of identities but of desire itself.

It is not insignificant that the attempt to describe the ontology of sexuality leads Bersani not to philosophy or even to psychoanalysis, but to literature. "Literature," he reflects in *The Freudian Body*, "mocks and defeats the communicative projects of language; it both invites interpretation and makes language somewhat unsuitable for interpretation. It forces us to be aware of the density of words not as a function of their semantic richness, but rather as a sign of their inadequacy to the mobile sense which they cannot enclose" (67). Literature calls attention to the inadequacy of its own medium for capturing the sensuous energies it attempts to bind in the erection of its sign system. Analogizing the literary text to the human ego, Bersani implies that both take shape through a process of "binding," Freud's term for the process through which physical forces become causally linked to affects and ideas in subject formation: the self forms, Bersani writes, as the infant develops "ego structures capable of resisting or, in Freudian terms, of binding [. . .] stimuli" (38). (Here, the self resists the world, which invades *it*.) Binding entails the establishment of links between signifiers (stimuli) and signifieds (the meaning or "effect" of those stimuli). In Proust, the mechanism that governs this binding and unbinding is habit. "[H]abit," the

narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* explains, “gives to the mere association of ideas between two phenomena [. . .] an illusion of the force, the necessity of a law of causation” (679). But while such associations may be contingent, this does not mean they are not easily “unbound.” This is because habit, when it generates the illusion of necessary causation, makes it hard to undertake actions that contravene the linkages between a stimulus and its (learned) response. The feeling of relief from anxiety produced by a cigarette will not be easily reproduced by the act of meditation. The intensity of pleasure generated by pressure applied to a specific part of the body in a specific way will not easily be achieved in another manner. Such associations might be reconfigured (either through effort or through an unforeseen encounter, which, if repeated, might eventually reroute one’s pleasure), but the force of habit generates a resistance that makes such reconfigurations difficult.

In *Marcel Proust*, Bersani dwells for some time on the “ambivalent attitude toward habit” expressed by the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* (24). In Bersani’s reading, the narrator “speaks of it as if it were a god, half god and half evil, making the world safe for the self but creating a world in which the self cannot grow.” It is habit that ensures that we do not have to relearn an activity or perceive a space anew each and every time, allowing us to glide with greater ease through the world. But while habit greases the wheels of selfhood by establishing continuity, it also stymies self-development by preventing change. Habit encourages us to repeat the activities that leave undisturbed the meaningful (though only apparently causal) material-semiotic linkages that have previously been established, manifesting a drive to repeat that, as Freud underlines, pulls us back to the inorganic.⁵

In his more deconstructive moments, Bersani privileges the moments of unbinding that break the habits that constitute the self, and he aligns such moments of unbinding with the collapse of meaning in the literary text. At other moments though, he insists on the recalcitrance of both body and text in the face not only of the construction of meaning but its *deconstruction*, emphasizing the extent to which “the habit of desire” resists attempts to reconfigure it by generating discourse about it. Can an intellectual awareness of the social construction of an identity shift the habit of desire that constitutes that identity? Perhaps, if desire merely *has* habits, for habits can be broken through reflection, effort, and other means. And yet, when Bersani suggests that “deconstructing an imposed identity will not erase the habit of desire,” he does not make habit plural. Had he done so, we might interpret him as criticizing the view that because desires are

habitual, they can be altered through an increased awareness of the constructed nature of the identities they constitute. In keeping habit singular, however, Bersani indicates something else. Returning to this line through his earlier writings on Freud and Proust, we can read Bersani as implying, rather, that desire *is* a form of habit—or put otherwise, that desire binds and unbinds according to the laws of habit, that habit is its guiding mechanism. On this reading, any hermeneutic practice that reveals an identity to be discursively constructed, while it might shift our *conception* of an identity, could never “erase the habit of desire” that lends it its shape. This is because the forces that constitute desire bind and unbind according to a fundamentally corporeal logic, one that language—whether that of literature or theory—can never fully touch.⁶

Let us recall, in closing, the first principle of Bersani’s theory of sexuality, derived from Proust: that desire is (universally) discriminating. It is so whether one is straight or gay, a man or a woman, cisgender or genderqueer. This is why for Bersani it is in the nature of desire, rather than in the nature of society, to produce inequality (which is not to say that specific inequalities are inevitable or inalterable). The second-order form that desire takes, moreover (which we sometimes call “sexual identity”), arises not out of the confrontation of a kind of fundamentally open and malleable being with the rigidifying force of the social (a process that might be reversed through an identity’s deconstruction), but rather out of a clash between the “inescapably invasive projects” of the self and the resistances that refine the contours of its always already rigidifying, because habit-forming, force.

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Notes

- 1 In keeping with Bersani’s use of the term, I employ the word *deconstruction* throughout this piece in a rather general way to mean the critical analysis of a structure through attention to its contradictory form. “The practitioner of deconstruction,” Jonathan Culler observes, “works within the terms of the system in order to breach it” (86). One could, of course, be far more precise, but the aim is not so much to target any particular deconstructive school or theorist (though to an extent Bersani does target Butler) as to index a set of still widely held assumptions about the capacity of

- a hermeneutic practice to break down or otherwise transform the system it interprets—in this case, the desires of actual people.
- 2 As Butler argues there, “[D]rag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality” (125).
- 3 For another powerful critique of Butler’s interpretation of *Paris Is Burning*, see Prosser.
- 4 For a more thorough analysis of Bersani’s so-called essentialism, see Tuhkanen.
- 5 Along similar lines, Catherine Malabou helpfully frames the tension between life and death drives in Freud as that between plasticity (the capacity for endless reformation) and elasticity (the tendency to return to a previous or original state): “If we read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* carefully,” she writes, “we discover that only the life drives are eventually said to be plastic. The death drive is ‘elastic.’ The destructive tendency, the compulsion to repeat, and the restoration of an earlier state of things are eventually driven out of the field of plasticity” (82). These two principles are intertwined in habit.
- 6 Lacanians might distinguish between “desire” and “drive” here and suggest that it is the intractability of the latter that disrupts signifi-catory capacities of language. Such a metaphysical distinction obfuscates the layer of subjective experience to which Bersani attends when he describes how desire qua habit becomes itself intractable, resistant to transformation through critique, even (especially?) when that critique calls on the destabilizing power of the drive. What is frustrating about habit, it might be said, is its refusal not to mean.

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