Title
Limits of Equivalence: Thinking Gay Male Subjectivity Outside Feminist Theory

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I’d like to begin by citing one of the great feminists of our time, Brittany Spears, who hypnotically rouses us to “give them a freak show.” My own attraction to this invitation, and no doubt I’m not alone in this, lies precisely in the desire for an encounter with the extra-ordinary. I Judith Butler even gives such a desire for the “outside” normative value when she situates critique, and critical imagination, in relation to such encounters with the exceptional, the strange, the freakish. While this may seem a strange horizon against which to begin an exposition on the limits of equivalency confronted by efforts to theorize gay male subjectivity through feminist discourses, my goal is to, from the outset, open the space to problematize this project. In other words, if the problem is a dissolution of the force of feminist “descriptive” and “prescriptive” or normative discourses when taken up by gay men, how does Brittany’s ventriloquial repetition expose the potential futility of a certain response to this dissolution, or this limit of equivalence?

The problem, of course, is that if we follow Foucault and Derrida—as I think Butler is careful to do—and theorize from an embedded position in a matrix or text which offers no outside, then we have ample reason to disabuse ourselves of the belief that any
signifier possesses an eternal or enduring “core” rendering it invulnerable to reappropriation, reassimilation, and redeployment: Brittany’s “Freakshow” as a point in case.iii Not even Butler’s subversion of identity escapes embeddedness in the ventricle circulation of discourses, and thus perhaps seeking out a theoretical discourse through which to address the specificity of gay male subjectivity is itself misguided.

Of course, certain attempts have been made to theorize gay male subjectivity in such a way as to resist reinscription; to my mind most seductively by Guy Hocquenghem in *Homosexual Desire*.iv However, Hocquenghem’s effort relies on a strategy of negation: under the influence of *Anti-Oedipus* and Foucault’s *History of Madness*, economized and juridicized psychoanalysis is the foil over-against which the homosexual emerges. Yet, what emerges is precisely nothing but a deconstruction of an imaginary constitution of the homosexual governed by a medico-juridical Oedipal apparatus: “Homosexuality exists and does not exist, at one and the same time: indeed, its very mode of existence questions again and again the certainty of existence.”v Indeed, I would argue that Hocquenghem is closer to Butler in wishing to position homosexual men in an “anal” relation that emphasizes the annular circulation of desire in a subversion of stable identities. For Butler, drag effects this subversive problematization, while for Hocquenghem it is gay sex in all its manifold practices (group, public, anonymous, ect).

Often what gets lost in critiques of Butler is this emphasis on praxis as subjectivation (her interest is in the deed, following Nietzsche’s destruction of the theologico-grammatological “doer behind the deed”).vi Yet, what is equally lost is a sense of selfhood, a means of understanding desire and the practices thereof in terms other than transgression—that is, outside an affirmation of “nothingness” or negation.
Here it is useful to cite David Halperin’s reminder in *What Do Gay Men Want?*: “Killing off psychology in such a context meant foreclosing all access to the category of gay subjectivity itself, bracketing it as an object of gay investigation, and making it impossible to ask, let alone answer, the question, “What do gay men want?” That indeed, was precisely the point: [...] shifting attention away from the disquieting and potentially discreditable details of gay subjectivity.” For Halperin, Foucault’s attention to, and emphasis of, *techniques* or *technologies of the self* (practices that, as practiced, subjectivate an actor in certain sets of ethical relations, including reflexivity) offers a means by which to situate gay male subjectivity.

Now, I should briefly summarize, and in so doing sharpen the trajectory of my following remarks. If the quest for an outside, which Butler’s theory of performativity and the “strange” may or may not be doing, is futile *if and only if* this “outside” is figured as immune to insidious capillary re-circulation, then the desire for a subject position that is definitively “strange” is simply a desire for reinscription within normalizing discourse. However, efforts analogous to negative theology or Sartrean existentialism which locate freedom *in* nothingness produce a very hollow account of subjectivity: the subject, in its resistance to hegemonic ideology, is-not, is inarticulable, dissolved; subversion of norms is coextensive with subversion of self, an unsatisfying Kristeva-esque psychosis.

At this point, and returning to the promised topic of my paper, the limits of equivalence emerge: while all subjects share a common embeddedness within a normative matrix, and, equally, all experience the disorienting effects of transgressive resistance, what is unique is the response to such dissolution. My interest is not, however, to explore a philosophical framework for attempting to understand this
response, but rather in formulating a decidedly political frame through which to view gay male subjectivity. Or, again, rather than attempt to solve the “subject question”—which would entail weaving an account of subjectivity that, somehow, manages to proffer an “escape” to a stable subjectivity outside coercive influence—IX—I am interested in the practices that serve as “punctuation marks,” as it were, for a certain type of sociality. Crucially, the metaphor is loose: I am not interested in critiquing the “good” or “bad” grammar of socio-political practices. My concern is in first and foremost identifying the ways in which certain social practices can been seen to structure the “text” of gay male life, so as to from there make an evaluative move.x

To say, then, that certain practices serve as the “punctuation marks” of (a certain) sociality is not terribly novel. Nor is it novel to insist on a “text” of sociality that is not cluttered or confused by an inordinate amount of grammatologics. This, instead, we call unfashionable.xi Nevertheless, to discern practices potentially discrete to gay male subjectivity need not entail acquiescence to a demand for a “second-order” synthesis of those practices into “first-order” analytic frames, especially feminist or “queer”.xii Here I should like to further sharpen my argument in two ways. First, I am calling for a certain sort of methodology—a sort of “interpretivism,”xiii or, as it travels in the Humanities, Foucauldian archeology or Nietzschean genealogy—with theoretical commitments that extend only to the point of positing the practices that comprise sociality to also be subject to interpretation, and that this interpretation is contingent on a literacy in the specific cultural discourses of that particular social network. This entails, no doubt, a certain degree of theoretical humility, and implicitly carries an ethical imperative barring the
violence that always accompanies any imposition \textit{a priori} of grand theoretical accounts.$^{xiv}$

Second, I would like to briefly offer a reading of Julia Kristeva. I choose Kristeva because she remains a powerful force in feminist theory, but also because she proposes a manner by which to read female subjectivity, “the semiotic,” which also proffers a means to resist the patriarchal, Symbolic repression of polymorphous perversity occasioned by the primary, maternal cathexis. I do so because, as is obvious, not only women are “poetic,” and thus the register of the semiotic is available to, and regularly employed by, men—unless we wish to say that they have thereby ceased being men when they (men) are “poetic”. Thus, we have an example of what I continuously refer to as the “limits of equivalence”: Kristeva offers gay men no theoretical assistance in their own resistance to patriarchal, Symbolic repression of polymorphous perversity—of which Freud counted homosexuals.$^{xv}$ At the same time, Kristeva’s project is illustrative to the extent that it exposes certain problematics an interpretivist methodology should take care to avoid repeating.

For the sake of brevity I follow Butler’s outlining of the difficulties with Kristeva’s argument so as to then draw the lessons I find valuable from Butler’s critique so as to situate them in relationship to the methodological style I’m advocating. Butler’s main contention is three-fold: 1) Kristeva characterizes the maternal body “as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself,” which 2) effectively reifies the maternal body while also 3) precluding analysis of the ways in which the maternal body is an \textit{effect} of certain cultural norms rather than their “primary and original cause.”$^{xvi}$ The point I wish to draw from this reading is simply this: when searching for a set of practices
interpretable as specifically gay (and male), it is necessary to position these social practices in the context of the cultural dynamism of which they are effects, and which, as such, are thus also effective (always affective). To this extent, synchronicity ceases to be adequate and must give way to an interpretation informed by the historicity of the subjects in question. Precisely because the binding power of certain practices is variable and mutable, an account that situates these micro-shifts in meaning in relation to one another promises greater understanding of those subjects who live by, and coalesce an identity around, these practices over time.

Now, it happens that Michael Warner, for instance, has provided a rather useful list of general “principles” that characterized “queer thought” before and after Stonewall.\textsuperscript{xvii} His point is to highlight the plurality of concerns and political stances that characterized a “queer ethic” prior to the normalizing impulses culminating in making marriage rights the national platform governing gay political action. Further, he sounds a skeptical note regarding the plasticity of norms that organize marriage, quipping, “It would seem rather much to expect that gay people would transform the institution of marriage by simply marrying.”\textsuperscript{xviii} Stylistics aside, this is a claim that can be interrogated, just as much as his prior claim that there existed a broader set of socio-political concerns and interests that animated the queer community around the time of Stonewall. Indeed, his “principles” should be sought in the daily, lived practices of gays living at that time, as should a rich account of how those practices structured, and gave meaning to, the lives of the subjects who lived by them. This analytic technique, I contend, is the first step towards the establishment of a theory of gay male subjectivity. Further, the descriptive and explanatory force of such a methodology is located precisely in its ability to process-
trace the development and transformation of these practices over time. That is, to be able to posit an account of a “gay male tradition”.

I must close by qualifying my argument, which is to say: I must re-affirm some of this essay’s guiding intellectual commitments. It is obvious to any casual observer that there is a plurality of “gay male subjectivities”—even if this turn of phrase isn’t invoked as such. It is equally obvious to this author. By arguing for a “limit of equivalence,” and by challenging gay men to critically explore their own history without succumbing to the subsumption of that analysis to hegemonic discourses, I implicitly acknowledge the differences that emerge under the heading “gay male subjectivity.” I do not wish to deflate this expansive operation, nor do I think it offers any intellectual traction on otherwise intractable problems. Rather, I wish to position my argument as an explicit call to articulate the (historico-culturally) specific practices that can be said, persuasively, to meaningfully organize a particular sociality. Only when this operation is performed, I think, can the very limits of equivalence be overcome so as to promise a forceful articulation in a public (political) forum of common interests. Crucially, this isn’t a messianic forestalling of such an articulation; rigorous emphasis on the historicity, and discursive embeddedness, of any given subject bars the phantastic desire for an overnight “revolutionary revaluation of values”. Rather, I am calling for a methodologically sound analysis capable of providing, in “real-time,” the theoretical “short-hand” that would enable certain subjects to navigate the world in which they live at that particular moment. And, I should add, to be able to anticipate the changes that such a particular way of life may confront in such a way as to not foreclose possible chains of equivalence, while not, at the same time, effacing the specificity of a certain sociality.
For an archetypal account of the “ordinary” as a space or set of relations governed by techniques and technologies ordered in such a way as to produce anonymity, or “inauthenticity,” see Alphonso Lingis, “We Mortals” Philosophy Today; Summer 1991; 35, 2; Research Library Core, pg. 119.


In a sense I’m indebted to Michael Warner’s argument concerning the materiality of the benefits of marriage which he mounts to counter certain poststructuralist objections about the plasticity of institutions. Cf. The Trouble With Normal (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). While Warner is right to situate marriage within the context of heteronormative, patriarchal juridicy these objections are too swiftly dismissed—in fact, institutions do change, and not always in a revolutionary, messianic catastrophe. Cf. William Sewell, “Three Temporalities,” in Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). My point here, however, is simply to suggest that arguing Britney’s repetition constitutes an invitation to “self-consciously de-naturalize” gay male subjectivity—rather than simply renaturalize homosexuality as freakish—an ironic notion of progress to be sure—would need to also account for the materiality of this repetition if it is to be persuasive.


This line of thinking is reminiscent of a Sartre’s metaphysico-ontology that locates freedom in the nothingness that can be said to “haunt” being. What is crucial, however, is to see the positing of an “outside,” a “nothingness” (or Lacanian “Real”). Butler identifies the same move in Hocquenghem’s contemporary, Monique Wittig: because the lesbian resists heteronormative binaries, she is no longer a woman but becomes “a category that radically problematizes both sex and gender as stable political categories of description.” Gender Trouble, 144.

Though, one could safely argue that Butler’s notion of “action” remains intimately linguistic, which may account for the need to emphasize the act of speech-acts in Excitable Speech.


Fresh in my mind, Tom Ford’s A Single Man features a luscious exchange wherein Huxley’s famous affirmation is cited by protagonist George: “Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him.” Indeed, it is when George is able to articulate this, quite unwittingly at first, to his border-line nihilistic student that his despair begins to be checked, transformed, and he imagines himself able to live again.

Genealogically speaking, there is a decisive split that occurs in 20th century “continental” philosophy: those who follow Hegel (a certain Heidegger, Kojeve, Sartre, Lacan, Nancy, and Butler) and those who follow Nietzsche (a different Heidegger, Freud, Bataille, Derrida, Foucault, and Halperin). The difference, in this context, is worth dwelling on to the extent that the former continue to operate within a dialectical structure wherein freedom is figured as negative, while the latter seek an affirmative articulation of subjective freedom.

Indeed, what I’m arguing is precisely the limits of equivalence. Rather than look to morally judge a particular sociality, I am interested first and foremost in discovering the specificity of a gay sociality. This is precisely the problem: we cannot perform an honest interpretation of gay male subjectivity if we don’t first abandon theoretical frames that obfuscate rather than clarify particular challenges, possibilities, and mistakes gay men confront and embrace. Only once we have endeavored such an analysis can we make normative statements. To the extent that this imperative—think outside “x” or “y” paradigm—is normative it is coextensively epistemological: only after the attempt to look at the world from other perspectives—what Arendt called “representative judging,” or Nietzschean perspectivism—can a judgment be made. This isn’t, of course, to forestall the moment of decision—here Arendt and Nietzsche avoid Schmittian/Derridean determinism; rather, judgments are made, provisionally, always already from the position of a singular subject with a pluralized imaginary: judgment is the conclusion of the negotiation of
this relationship. Such wrestling, however, presupposes fluency in the discourses of the community, which must also be capable of translating that idiom into a more generalizable, evaluative schema.

x Recently philosophers and political theorists alike have made recourse to Carl Schmitt, the Weimar jurist, who (in)famously argued the political—and by extension, any political community—is structured around the “friend/enemy” distinction. That Schmitt’s later complicity with the Nazi regime is often used, *ad hominem*, to discredit his forceful and still pertinent critiques of Liberalism shouldn’t detract from the persuasiveness of his argument, nor should it demand attention to the vacuity of his detractors. Rather, and in the context of my argument, any given community is constantly in the process of determining how to, and who does, constitute the “identity” of a (fabricated) given community. That this question presupposes a certain literacy in the social practices specific to a certain community (what I call “punctuation marks”) only serves to throw added emphasis on the importance of being able to discern a set of institutions, gestures, and bodily acts and postures/carriages specific to gay male life. Still, and eager to resist Hegelian dialectics, I would suggest that Schmitt’s dichotomy proffers a space in which to theorize the “two sides of the same coin”: to be a gay man is “x, y, and z”—a determination that only indirectly references what is “not” a gay man (i.e., “a, b, and c”). Stylistically speaking, I am more inclined to attend to the first series, imperfect as it may be, rather than the latter, knowing that the latter set will only put me, once again, in a position of “negation”—“not-you”—whereas I am interested in speaking, and more the point, *living “me.”* 

xii I here single out “queer theory”—an intellectual discipline I readily, and happily, subsume my own theoretical efforts under—to the extent that it is, typically, concerned with a politics of inclusion. I find, often, what is elided in these discourses is the specificity of desires, projects, world-views, and social horizons singular to each participant in a coalitional political project. Intersectionality serves as the hegemonic discourse par excellence in contemporary queer theory such that, for instance, any effort to articulate a uniquely gay male narrative need be prefaced with an apology for doing so, and must necessarily invite the “queering” of such a narrative—as if to suggest that the narrative in and of itself isn’t already “queer”.

xiii Clifford Geertz is an exemplar of this methodology in cultural anthropology. Within political science, cf. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) whose skillfully posed dialogue between a Foucauldian power/knowledge hermeneutic and more structurally oriented social science persuasively reveals the “ambiguities” that antagonize, but also consolidate, personality-centric authoritarian regimes.

xiv Cf. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 200_). In this text, a revised version of a lecture course delivered in Amsterdam years before, Butler makes the case for an ethics rooted in a respect for the opacity of a subject to herself and the Other to himself such that we reject the demand for a total account, and also check our own desire to issue such a demand—of others, and ourselves. While Butler begins from an analysis of Cavarrero’s reading of Arendtian natality and the invitation to “relate narratives” (to paraphrase the title of Cavarrero’s work), she very quickly extrapolates the subject out of the public, pluralized world that, for Arendt, is where an analysis of ethics—especially political ethics—must be situated. Indeed, by the end of *Giving…* Butler has even extrapolated the ethical out of the human (following Adorno’s lectures on morality)—a typically Hegelian dialectical negation: the ethical is located in a realm which, or a subject who, is not: the “inhuman”. Here one is perfectly incapable of “relating narratives” precisely because such “relating” (on Cavarrero’s terms) must be temporally bi-directional, re-counting the past, while opening the future: one is between past and future, not emergent out of the negation of the past, but rather it’s affirmation.


