

Im/Mobility

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“Im/Mobility”

Lisa Downing

Abstract and Keywords:

In Baudelaire and Freud (1977), Leo Bersani posits that psychoanalysis offers a way of understanding sexuality as characterized by the mobility of fantasy, rather than by the content of fetishes or sexual identities, and that this mobility offers the “potential for explosive displacements”. In this short meditation, I explore how “mobility” as a concept, understood in Bersani’s sense, helps us think beyond some of the paradoxes, redundancies and aporia in both psy science and queer theoretical models of sexuality. I close by showing how Bersani returned to “mobility” in Homos (1995) and argue that, via this concept, he suggests ways that queer theory itself can avoid becoming a “new normativity”.

Keywords: fantasy; psychoanalysis; perversion; mobility; queer theory; Sigmund Freud; Leo Bersani

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“A psychoanalytic theory of fantasy can be most profitably brought into the analyses

of literary texts not in terms of specific sexual content, but rather in terms of the mobility of fantasy, of its potential for explosive displacements.” (Bersani, Baudelaire and Freud 6)

Where sexology gave us names for “specific sexual content”, labelling the perversions and bringing into being specific sexual subjectivities as fixed identities, the kind of libidinal, psychoanalytically-informed, aesthetic and political theory potentiated by Leo Bersani offers us, instead, room for movement. I first discovered Bersani via my reading of his short 1977 book, Baudelaire and Freud, which was of impeccable relevance for the doctoral thesis I wrote at Oxford in the 1990s, “Desire and Immobility: Situating Necrophilia in Nineteenth-Century French Literature”, a version of which would become the book Desiring the Dead in 2003. In considering the representation and literary embodiment of a desire type such as necrophilia, I was troubled by the paradox of the forward-flung motility of desire, set against the immobility of both the subject matter/ object of desire (in this case: the dead) and the ultimate nature of the project of writing, which is to fix meaning in words. Added to this was the seemingly immovable nature of the taboo I was addressing – the difficulty of thinking about the forbidden in all its difficulty and deliciousness without facing (internalized and external) accusations of moral degeneracy. In a range of ways, the tense push-and-pull between mobility and stasis – and interdiction and libidinal permissiveness – haunted my endeavours.

The sentence that forms the inspiration for this meditation suggests a way of breaking the impasse I found myself in when writing that thesis, although it also stands as an enduringly knotty conundrum that has continued to colour my work. I

have written widely on the meaning and potential of fixity and fluidity in sexuality throughout its modern history and its contemporary condition, as well as the broader lessons that sexuality's movements and stagnations lend to cultural life. As Bersani highlights in Baudelaire and Freud, Freud's psychoanalysis was revolutionary in its day for the way it moved the terms of the understanding of sexuality – both “normal” and “abnormal” – on from where the foundational sexologists such as Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, author of the “Bible of sexology”, Psychopathia Sexualis (1886), had left it. For Krafft-Ebing and his counterparts, sexuality directed towards anything other than reproductive heterosexual intercourse was both irredeemably pathological and the symptom of a sick or “degenerate” society. The sexological approach to sex was focused precisely on “sexual content”, and its method was taxonomy. Having pronounced on the sickness of non-reproductive sex, Krafft-Ebing went on to name as many perversion types as he encountered in clinical practice and via soliciting confessional correspondence from self-defining perverts, giving us, for example, “sadism” and “masochism” as desire types; named, not accidentally, after prominent and infamous literary figures; literature being, as Bersani shows us in his book, the site where libido moves the writer.

By contrast, Freud began from the position that Eros is inherently chaotic – potentially explosive – not sick in nature, but rather inconvenient for a heterosexually organized, pro-natalist society that needs it to behave itself. He also identified bisexuality rather than monosexuality, and perversion rather than genitality, as our default states: infants are bisexual and polymorphously perverse, and it is only through a process of coerced psychical socialization that they fixate into acceptable heterosexual and reproductive adult sexuality – or fail/ refuse to do so. (It is this

understanding that enables Jonathan Dollimore to quip, borrowing from de Beauvoir, that “one does not become a pervert, but remains one”. (176))

For critics of psychoanalysis – most famously, perhaps, Michel Foucault and some of his queer theoretical followers – the conservatism of Freud’s prescription of “normal” genitality is taken as intrinsic, and as paradigmatic of modern systems of power that operate via the imposition and internalization of norms, rather than via interdictions. Yet, Freud’s position on sexual object-choice and act can alternatively be understood as socially pragmatic. The primary evidence, in fact, is against the view that Freudian psychoanalysis (in its foundational texts, if not its later practice and application by analysts) is thoroughly conservative in its understanding of sex. When considering if it would be possible to “turn” a heterosexual person homosexual, Freud famously commented that, while it may be possible to restore “primary bisexuality”, this is never attempted – but only for “practical reasons” (Freud, Psychogenesis 151). Freud also rejected any notion that either homosexuality or perversion in an individual would be markers of other kinds of deviation from the norm or of sickness.

Some scholars of queer theory interested in the disruptive power of Eros have drawn, like Bersani (who famously disavowed the term “queer theory” for his own work), on the anarchic energy of libido as painted by the foundational texts of psychoanalysis, and as developed by the “French Freud” Jacques Lacan. Prominent among these, we might cite Tim Dean, who, in his seminal Beyond Sexuality (2000), argues that psychoanalysis is a form of queer theory in its own right since, in psychoanalysis, “there is no privileged sexual activity or erotic narrative to which we

should all aspire, no viable sexual norm for everybody, because desire's origins are multiple and its ambition no more specific than satisfaction" (Dean 196). Dean, like Bersani after Freud, characterizes erotic fantasy as both mobile and multiform, and the narrative or activity it might focus on as incidental. This is a canny political insight, since much homophobic rhetoric centers on fear, shame and disgust precisely around acts.

In some of my own earlier work, however, I have, by contrast, been critical precisely of the value attributed to "fluidity", as distinct from "fixity," in both queer theoretical and psychoanalytical models of desire. In 2017, for a book on clinical encounters between queer theory and psychoanalysis, I wrote of how, in many ways, fluidity may be understood as the overdetermined fetish of psychoanalysis, just as much as it is the fetish of queer theory – the latter a point previously made by Brad Epps (2001). I pointed out that, in the first of his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, Freud distinguishes the polymorphous infantile perversity he theorizes from adult perversion which is fixated, and marks only the latter with pathological overtones. He writes: "if a perversion has the characteristic of exclusiveness and fixation – then we shall usually be justified in regarding it as a pathological symptom" (161). I also meditated on the irony of Freud's slightly sniffy dismissal of erotic fixation, where that fixation is on an "improper" object, in a society in which heterosexuality and monogamy are the most prized and rewarded forms of attachment – and are definitionally exclusive fixations. While I stand by this critique of the value judgments ascribed to fixity and fluidity, and their continuing operation as a stuck binary in both the psy sciences and queer theory, I think the power and valency of the term "mobility" as Bersani uses it in 1977, in close proximity to the term "explosive

displacements”, retains an enduring power. And it is a power that has not been fully teased out and that bears further scrutiny.

We might ask, then, for Freud and Bersani both, *what exactly* does the mobility of erotic fantasy that psychoanalysis postulates have the potential of explosively displacing? The most obvious answer, perhaps, is “the norm”. As expounded in the sentence on which this piece meditates, any given bodily act or desiring subject position is not transgressive or challenging (only) by dint of its content, but by dint of its relation to the centre – that is by dint of what it displaces. Queer theory is precisely concerned with how antinormativity can enact this kind of destabilization, yet Bersani’s insight may also have some relevance for overcoming what we might see as a troubling impasse in the state of queer theory as it currently stands today in the third decade of twenty-first century. The centrality of the post-Foucauldian term “normativity” and its opposite “antinormativity” to queer theory has become a given. Tim Dean wrote in Beyond Sexuality of how queer needs psychoanalytic insights to avoid the tendency to fall into identity claims, as “any theory of nonnormative sexuality is extremely difficult to sustain without a psychoanalytic, depsychologized understanding of the unconscious. In other words, without an understanding of the unconscious, queer sexualities themselves become normalizing (paradoxical though that sounds), insofar as sexuality becomes wedded to identity” (Dean 6). The fixing of desire to identity is a move that queer theory has nominally opposed, but that, in our current moment – a Zeitgeist that some would argue is characterized by ultra-identitarianism and beset by political rifts on the very basis of identity – it behooves us to address again.

It has long been feared that queer might fail at being sufficiently radical. The “becoming normalized” of queer, against which Dean warns, is encapsulated in Lisa Duggan’s 2002 coining “homonormativity” – a term designed to express a queerness softened and defanged by neoliberalism. Has homonormativity (“queernormativity”) already arrived, and does it mark the end point of queer theory’s value as truly disruptive – as, to use Bersani’s word, “explosive”? Annamarie Jagose has a particularly intriguing take on this. In an article that appeared in this journal in 2015, she argues that “[d]espite its much flaunted anti-identitarianism, queer theory’s definitional commitment to the antinormative risks reifying antinormativity as a proto-identity or identity-effect” (Jagose 43). Much as Epps argued that queer theory reifies fluidity, and I argued that psychoanalysis can be construed to do likewise, Jagose mounts a convincing claim that “antinormativity” has become something of a fetish for queer, despite it’s not being “a homogenous thing except in its field-founding force for queer theory.” (44)

Jagose offers a salutary lesson about getting too attached to any object in our scholarly and political endeavours, to the extent that it is no longer subject to questioning, to reflexivity, and is no longer capable of surprising or unsettling us or its target. I would go so far as to argue that queer itself risks becoming a type of “new normativity” in the twenty-first century, as discussions of what is “properly queer” proliferate – most unqueerly – in a moment that appears, to me at least, to be oversaturated with posturing claims to political purity and the policing of the same. Presciently, Bersani gestured towards such a moment in the Prologue to Homos (1995), when he writes of what he perceives to be the impending evacuation of eroticism from queer politics. “[I]s queer now to be taken as delineating political

rather than erotic tendencies?”, he asks (Homos 2). Moreover, as an antidote to such a move, Bersani writes that it is precisely by focusing on “mobility” that we could “create a kind of community, one that can never be settled” (Homos 9), one which brings out and celebrates “the homo’ in all of us” (10). Mobility explodes the political purity of anti-normativity here, and reinfuses politics with pleasure – even with jouissance.

In Baudelaire and Freud, and later in Homos, Bersani rejects identity, content, and predictability in favour of explosive movement and self-generating meaning-making, in a way that might seem more relevant and more needed today than ever before. His attraction to Baudelaire’s poetry is summed up in his closing description of a libidinous œuvre characterized by an “excitingly playful, if risky, adventure in self-scattering and self-displacement” (Baudelaire and Freud, 151). Yet the insights he draws from the literary extend beyond that representational realm. In nudging us to challenge how we understand and interpret the explosive effects of mobile desire and fantasy on life, death, politics and art, Bersani effectively moved the terms of the debate. He also affectively moves his readers, by dint of his startling prose, to think otherwise about sexuality, outside of the understandings offered by both pathologizing, psychologizing discourses and a sexual avant garde increasingly in danger of sclerosis and redundancy.

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