Homotopia?: Gay Identity, Sameness & the Politics of Desire

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Conclusion

Fear of a Gay Anus

“Ah, did you but know how delicate is one’s enjoyment when a heavy
prick fills the behind... No, no, in the wide world there is no pleasure
to rival this one; it is the delight of philosophers, that of heroes, it
would be that of the gods were not the parts used in this divine
conjugation the only gods we on earth should reverence!”
– Marquis de Sade, Philosophy in the Bedroom

“The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the
roots of our identity but to commit ourselves to its dissipation.”
– Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’

What are the relations between the statements made by these
four writers? How do they formulate a body of knowledge, a
discourse? What are the referents, the correlations, the themes?¹
How is meaning established at the level of discourse? How does
that discourse become solid? What are its limits? How does it let
us down? And how can we change it?

As these readings have shown, these four writers signal a deep
anxiety about the body and its pleasures. Such isomorphism
constitutes a discursivity lacking in materiality. Whilst the task
of much late twentieth century theory such as Golding, Haver
and Butler has been to “bring the body out from the shadow
of the mind, bring practice out from the shadow of theory”¹, it
would appear that a century ago homosexual discourse actively
directed attention away from the body and onto a mastery over
the body. The ‘homosexual body’ as a discursive entity was for-

¹ Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 21–30.
mulated on the subordination of the body as a material entity with dangerous orifices and dark desires.

In this way, these texts help towards demarcating the limits of that discourse. By adopting medical theories and terminology, these four writers didn’t so much reverse discourse as supply it with experiential data. However much the identity politics instigated by these texts exceeded the medical categorization and subjectivation, by working within the same theoretical field they ultimately consolidated the binarisms immanent in the normative theories of desire with which they worked. The heterological nature of those theories limited the ‘truth’ which could emerge. In this sense, one can say that there is no reverse discourse: there is only discourse. The field of knowledge to which these four texts responded and contributed was one and the same. Their resistance was also a capitulation. Neither Gide, nor Proust, nor Carpenter or Symonds formulated a truly *homo*sexual theory of desire as desire for the same. Their texts are no cartography of a homotopia.

The theories of desire developed within Western epistemology are predicated on concepts of complementarity developed out of the male/female binary, which is embedded within a normativising and naturalizing scientific discourse. These theories understand desire within a register of lack, or difference, which is incapable of addressing a desire for the same; a homosexual desire. Within them, same-sex desire is never more than a double helix with no obvious or ‘natural’ complementarity. The attempt to force the square peg of same-sex desire into the round hole of the male/female binary has resulted in a skewed understanding of homosexuality as a mimesis of heterosexuality, in which ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles are adopted to overcome this absence of complementarity. Formulated within a heterosexual hegemony, or heterology, the theories of desire available, from sexology through to Freudianism and Lacanianism, all work within a rubric of sexual difference: Freud’s ‘heterosexual dispositions’; Lacan’s ‘Having and Being the Phallus’. These theories deny homosexuality. We cannot use them. To use them is to heterosexualize homosexuality.
The heterosexualization occurs through the installation of the normative heterosexual male/female dyad, underpinned by a naturalizing discourse on procreation. As the four texts demonstrate, a refusal to entertain the possibility of anal pleasure became a central tenet of the emancipationist programme. One could say the anus is the gaping void in homosexual discourse, the absence of which bears witness to an anxiety about its very existence. As I have shown, this anxiety is due to the feminization attached to the so-called passive role; and this is due to the heterosexual model of desire upon which the homosexual model was predicated. Even the refusal to talk about anal sex marks it as the secret and puts it at the heart of homosexual discourse. For at the level of discourse, the accordance of a value or truth can derive not only from what is said, “but also what it speaks of, its theme”,3 which can derive from what is not said as much as from what is said. To mention anal sex drew suspicion that one was a passive sodomite. Like the self-consuming snake Ourobouris, this chain of associations is circuitous, feeding into itself endlessly: homosexuality = anal passivity = effeminacy = homosexuality...

By failing to challenge these associations, Gide, Proust, Carpenter and Symonds – however pioneering – installed them, and all their concomitant anxieties, within the modern discourse on ‘gay identity’. Through their uncritical adoption as Urtexts of homosexual discourse, these writings formed a significant part of the foundations upon which our current understandings of homosexual identity were built. In this sense, this book has been driven by the exigencies of a wider, more contemporary political programme: an attempt to redefine the homosexual/homosexuality. This redefinition is predicated on the notion of sameness as opposed to difference. Sex between two men – or, more specifically, intercourse – should not be seen as a mimetic gesture of heterosexual intercourse. The desire to make such a reading stems, I have tried to show, from a long-standing tradition of binary thinking within metaphysics, science, sociology, and an-

3 Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 90.
thropology. But within this formulation, as we saw in Proust, there was no such thing as a homosexual.

Fundamental Pleasures
The only nineteenth century writer to acknowledge sodomy in remotely positive terms was Sir Richard Burton, whose 1885 ‘Terminal Essay’ explained the phenomenon as occurring within what he referred to as the Sotadic Zone, a geographical area significantly excluding Western Europe. Anal intercourse could be granted discursive existence only on the understanding that it was the barbaric behaviour of uncivilized Easterners, figures constructed as the Other, upon whom all forms of debauchery could be safely projected. Further distance was achieved by the declaration that “it is a medical question whose discussion would be out of place here”.¹ No attempts at pseudo-science here. Burton further obscures his source material by quoting it in Latin, Greek and German, and putting certain less palatable phrases in French. As Rudi Bleys points out, Burton “held onto a pre-modern notion of sodomy as an act”.² Yet, for Burton, too, same-sex activity was predicated on “a blending of the feminine and the masculine”.³ Gender would appear to be inextricably linked with sexuality from the very beginnings of our understandings of both.

Through the lens of nineteenth century sexology, only passive sodomites were innate homosexuals – and innate homosexuality was recognizable through a salient and reviled effeminacy. The active partner’s reasons for indulging in such behaviour were considered to be more varied and contingent (lack of women, general debauchery, too much masturbation, curiosity, money, etc). Sexology’s construction of innate homosexuality as a discrete category indiscreetly recognizable by atypical gender behaviour served a need to promote homosexuals as visibly different from heterosexuals at a time when gender roles were

² Bleys, Geography of Perversion, 216
undergoing great change and as such were the site of enormous cultural anxiety. Moreover, this visible difference spoke of an essential interior difference which constituted human sexuality along two separate axes: heterosexuality and homosexuality; one prescribed the other proscribed. As such, homosexuality in its visibly different form – effeminacy – is far more palatable to a culture dependent upon the stability of heterosexual norms. Indeed, that stability is contingent upon the construction of homosexuals as Other, as a race apart, against which normative heterosexual identities can be formulated. Male passivity threatens to destabilize the construction of masculine identity as active, so much that males who are passive cannot be seen as men, they have relinquished their male privilege, and occupy the site of perversion and emasculation. Conversely, if one only ever adopts the active role, one can, in a sense, avoid the proscriptive taint of being ‘less of a man’; one is seen as using another man ‘as if he were a woman’.

Moe Meyer’s work on the politics of posing in regard to Wilde’s production of the ‘homosexual’ as a discursive figure is useful in revealing how surface and depth are read against each other in the construction of an interiority made comprehensible by an identifiable exteriority. Edelman, too, explores the ways in which discourse has posited that the ‘homosexual’ carries on the surface of his body the indelible and horrifically decipherable marks of his essential deviance. This inscription is necessary, he concludes, to mark homosexual men as different from heterosexual men, given that, in reality, such difference is not visible but construed. Coining a neologism – homographesis – from the two words homograph and graphesis, Edelman argues that the visibly different homosexual body was an inscribed figure, a discursive entity, whose difference was written on the surface of the body. A homograph is a word identical in spelling but different in meaning: the homosexual male body must be given a different meaning to that of the heterosexual male body,

8 Edelman, Homographesis, 10.
given that on the surface such differences need not be apparent. The discursive inscription upon the homosexual body of differences always apparent was the most (homo)graphic way of signaling such difference.⁹ So while masculinity was inscribed on the surface of the heterosexual male body as the indelible mark of his identity, femininity became graphically, elaborately, inscribed on the surface of the homosexual male body as the indelible mark of identity. And that femininity carried with it all the charge of passivity, receptivity, an ability to be endlessly penetrated, and as such to be, horrifically, the site of disease – both culturally and literally. Bersani points out the ways in which

the realities of syphilis in the nineteenth century and of AIDS today legitimate a fantasy of female sexuality as intrinsically diseased; and promiscuity in this fantasy, far from merely increasing the risk of infection, is the sign of infection. Women and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction.¹⁰

This conflation of female sexuality and gay male sexuality around a trope of receptivity is most graphically exemplified by the terms man-cunt and boy-pussy. To use the anus to receive an erect penis feminizes not only that orifice, metamorphosing it into a vagina, but also, as the closed, private and impenetrable site of masculine identity, this usage threatens, moreover, to feminize the entire body, the identity itself.

**The Politics and Poetics of the Anus**
In contrast to the blanket denial of anal sex by the four authors presented here, homosexual pornography from the late nineteenth century presents it as a common activity. In *Teleny*, for example, one character asks rhetorically, “Ah!… what pleasures can be compared with those of the Cities of the Plain?”¹¹ The

⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’, 211. Original emphasis. Further citations will appear in brackets indicated by the abbreviation RG.
¹¹ Anon., *Teleny* [1884], Gay Sunshine Press, 1984, 140.
Sins of the Cities of the Plain is the title of another late Victorian homosexual porn novel, in which the narrator, Jack Saul, recounts his sexual history as both active and passive partner. No sign here of that repugnance referred to by Ellis. Rather, a lewd, crude celebration of sodomy, a paean to paedatio. Indeed, the title of one chapter, ‘Same Old Story: Arses Preferred to Cunts’, would seem to foreground the anus as the favoured site of pleasure-taking (albeit the active partner’s pleasure is the main concern in such a statement).

It would seem, then, that an openness about anal sex was only available in exchange for anonymity, in the way that Symonds’ sexual explicitness was possible only upon abdicating his signature. Privately printed and secretly circulated, pornography – anonymous or pseudonymous – was able to represent explicitly what even medical texts often shied away from discussing and apologist accounts denied.

The anus as the site of particular anxiety, a discursive battleground in the field of sexuality, is a point elaborated on by 1970s gay theorists Guy Hocquenghem and Mario Mieli, for whom it was a revolutionary orifice. Now wildly outdated and discretioned for their naïve utopianism, it will nevertheless be beneficial to explore briefly their ‘anal politics’ as their work indicates that the anxieties surrounding anal sex are still in place in the late twentieth century – due, I believe, in part at least, to the normative binarisms underpinning the definition of homosexuality.

Hocquenghem claims, “whereas the phallus is essentially social, the anus is essentially private”, which could explain its more revered place in privately printed pornography. Hocquenghem follows Freud in seeing “the anal stage as the stage of formation of the person” (HD, 96), an organ whose only function is private. Unlike the phallus, the anus does not enjoy a social role as an object of desire or admiration; any desire directed towards the anus must be sublimated to maintain

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12 Anon., The Sins of the Cities of the Plain; or the Recollections of a Mary-Ann with short essays on Sodomy and Tribadism [1881], Masquerade Bad Boy Books, 1992.

not only the organization of society around the great signifier, but also a stable sense of self. This is because “ours is a phallic society, and the quantity of possible pleasure is determined in relation to the phallus” (HD, 95). For this reason, Hocquenghem argues that the homosexual use of the anus as a pleasure-giving organ challenges the anality-sublimation by restoring its desiring use. This desiring use exists in everyone, he believes, but its sublimation is a prerequisite of the socialization process and the formation of the subject. As such, homosexual desire can be seen as essentially anti-social, for “homosexuality primarily means anal homosexuality, sodomy” (HD, 98). For him, sociality itself is contingent on the sublimation of the erotic value of the anus. Furthermore, a desublimation of this desiring use of the anus can lead to a loss – or shattering – of identity. Bersani sees this as a positive challenge to monolithic sexuality: “To be penetrated is to abdicate power” (RG, 212, original emphasis), and that abdication of power is, ultimately, a challenge to traditional masculinity. Bersani believes that “the value of powerlessness in both men and women” has been denied, by which he means not passivity or gentleness, but “a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self” (RG, 217). This disintegration of the self is the real threat of homosexuality, argues Bersani, and it is inextricably linked to the terrifying and seductive image of “a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman” (RG, 212). He links passive sodomy to the sexual politics of power, which places gay men in the same position as heterosexual women: on the receiving end of that inviolate symbol of mastery, the Phallus. Once again, heterological thinking is governing the readings of sexual positions and the sameness of homosexual intercourse is conflated with the difference of heterosexual intercourse.

The obvious anatomical point of departure for this analogy between gay men and straight women is that the former also possess a phallus, that signifier whose lack is supposed to be the predicate of their desire. The anus exists as a separate erotic site and intercourse between men, therefore, should not be seen as a displaced heterosexuality which renders the receptive partner
female, but, on the contrary, a purely homosexual act – i.e., a sexual act between two bodies which are the same sex.

In these accounts, anal sex becomes the diacritical marker distinguishing gay sexuality. Whilst Hocquenghem prefers to emphasise the psychological and political aspects, at the expense of any concept of pleasure, Mieli, on the other hand, bluntly states:

The point is, that if you get fucked, if you know what tremendous enjoyment is to be had from anal intercourse, then you necessarily become different from the ‘normal’ run of people with a frigid arse. You know yourself more deeply. 14

For Mieli, being penetrated heightens one’s sense of self rather than, as Bersani suggests, threatening to shatter it. To get fucked gives one greater knowledge of who one is: You know yourself more deeply. It becomes the key lesson in a heuristics of pleasure. But one which produces enormous anxiety. Mieli isolates anal sex as the one aspect of homosexuality that heterosexual men fear above all: “This is undoubtedly due not just to the repression of their anal desire, but also to their fear of castration – in essence, the fear of falling off the masculine pedestal into the ‘female’ role” (HL, 139). However, he then states that every male experiences a fear of castration, without making it clear whether this includes those men who enjoy being penetrated. The problem, once again, is the conflation of the anus with the vagina. 15 Why is it not possible for a man to be penetrated without automatically and inevitably falling “into the ‘female’ role”? Mieli suggests that the fear of falling into this role, which is linked to the fear of losing one’s virility, is really a fear of the loss of identity. It would seem that a penetration is being perpetrated not only on an orifice but on identity itself: the skin as identity boundary.

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15 Charles Socarides, a renowned homophobe, accused any psychoanalyst who attempted to help a homosexual of elevating the anus to the status of the vagina.
For Hocquenghem too the homosexual role is a confused identity – something they share with women. For homosexual men, this confusion arises from the fact that, given its private role in the formation of the self, “any social use of the anus […] creates the risk of a loss of identity” (*HD*, 101). This loss can be equated to the powerlessness, the psychic disintegration of which Bersani speaks. Both Mieli and Hocquenghem root this anxiety in the psychic processes governing the creation of the subject within traditional psychoanalytic patterns, whereby the phallus is the marker for sexual differentiation and identity formation. Mieli argues that detached from this pattern, anal sex can be enjoyed for the simple physical pleasure it is, but that the precondition for this is a reciprocity in which both partners give and take. Liberation of the arsehole would seem to lead to a greater liberation of the individual. By linking anal repression to the rule of the phallus in patriarchal capitalism, Hocquenghem suggests a similar theory; as he playfully states in his essay “Towards an Irrecuperable Pederasty’, “Our assholes are revolutionary.” For this reason, their work has been largely discredited as working with what Foucault calls the ‘repressive hypothesis’.

A correlation – we could even call it a binarism – emerges between the phallus and the anus, in which a reinvestment of the anus “collectively and libidinally would involve a proportional weakening of the great phallic signifier” (*HD*, 103). Our culture’s fear of the gay anus begins to make sense when one considers that any libidinal use of it robs the phallus of its power as primary signifier. In this model, we could fuck our way to revolution. Yet, for Mieli at least, homosexuality remains a signifier of “the woman within”, a form of “trans-sexuality”, and ‘masculinity’ becomes something one relinquishes through the act of sodomy. Again, we see homosexuality and masculinity as irreconcilable polarities, occupying opposite sides of that wounding cut ‘/’, which establishes them as opposing terms. Again, we come up against the need for a non-heterological – a homological? –

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definition of same-sex desire; one which refuses to perpetuate such myths.

The Butch Bottom
The problems facing the homosexual man trying to negotiate an identity between the two poles of overt effeminacy and traditional masculinity are obvious. Particularly today, when passing as straight is considered a cop-out while to be straight-acting is considered a turn-on. This negotiation process is complicated further if one happens to enjoy getting fucked, a behaviour traditionally considered, as I have shown, to be demeaning, disempowering, and effeminizing. Even within homosexual subcultures, there is a strong belief that real men give, pansies take. The concept of the ‘butch bottom’ is almost culturally inconceivable, for the very act of allowing a man to penetrate one’s body would seem to submit one to a necessary and unavoidable ontological femaleness within the normative binaries of active/passive and male/female.

When Foucault stated in an interview that “most gays feel the passive role is in some way demeaning” he is referring explicitly to this knot of definitional axes. Passivity is seen as a non-male behaviour, for true maleness is predicated on activity. Foucault claims that “S&M has actually helped alleviate this problem somewhat”. The rules governing the giving and taking of pleasure/pain in the SM scenario empower the bottom: s/he is in control, regulating the pleasures/pains received. There is no inherent inferiority attached to the taking of pleasure. The femininity/inferiority association is a political manoeuvre governing the correct behaviour of men and women in patriarchal society. Semantically, we need to see the bottom as taking pleasure, not just giving it; to re-establish the equality between the two partners.

18 Foucault, Foucault Live, 227.
19 Ibid.
The *New Joy of Gay Sex* worryingly reinforces the passive aspect of being a bottom by stating that:

Being a bottom is [...] more importantly a state of mind, a feeling one has about oneself in relationship to other men. ‘Bottom’ (in sexual terms) denotes wanting to be taken care of and to be directed by the ‘top’. In some men it may reflect an important streak of passivity, as if to say, “I want to give myself up to you.”

This is essentialism of the worst kind, conflating a more or less universal need for care with a sexual preference. In some men, being a bottom may well coincide with wanting to give oneself up to another man, but it could also be the opposite. Or something else entirely. Wanting to get fucked needn’t be symptomatic of wanting to be told what to do. It needn’t be an abdication of autonomy. Assuming the desire and pleasure is mutual, the bottom is taking exactly what he wants and is very much in control of, the agent of, his own desires. Even Bersani, in his analysis of gay appropriations of masculinity in the fashion for machismo, calls it a “mockery [...] based on the dark suspicion that you may not be getting the real article” (*rg*, 208), so ingrained is the belief that masculinity is completely at odds with homosexuality. ‘Masculine/homosexual’, as Dollimore states, is one of the most violently hierarchical of all binarism; one which has been directly endorsed by the medical discourse and indirectly by the likes of Gide, Proust, Carpenter and Symonds.

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21 This is where the imagined vast divide between s&m practices and vanilla sex forecloses a mutual learning process. By exploring the top/bottom relationship in s&m, it may be possible to learn something capable of application within a vanilla scenario: “The fact is, s&m is controlled and responsible sexual activity. We have a very highly developed sense of ethics. We have a golden rule that when the bottom [masochist] says enough, the activity stops.” Quoted in Weeks, *Invented Moralities*, 128. In this scenario, the bottom does not want to be taken care of, nor abdicate autonomy. Rather, the bottom is in charge, determining the limits of the game, and not at the mercy of the top. Not powerless or abused.
Gide et al. downplayed sodomy’s role in homosexual desire ostensibly because they associated it with effeminacy and degeneracy, but it also represents a form of male intimacy that is culturally too threatening. Within a heterosexual hegemony, sexual intimacy is the privilege of a heterosexual union. Gay anal sex is dangerous because it so closely resembles traditional heterosexual intercourse in terms of positionality that when the male/female pattern is mapped onto the male–male coupling, the insertee becomes a woman. To alter the perception, one must alter the definition, and see homosexuality as a sexuality in its own right, without recourse to an ‘original’ heterosexuality which is being aped, ineptly (due to anatomical differences). To recognize in homosexuality the potential to recalibrate desires and pleasures along non-binaric lines.

As Gide argued, pleasure, not procreation, is the motor for sexual activity. Libido is distinct from the desire to reproduce. In an age of birth control, much heterosexual activity is sterile, anyway, indulged in for pleasure. Because one act precedes the other, the two have been conflated, the ‘naturalness’ of the link used to support arguments for the ‘unnaturalness’ of non-procreative or recreative sex.

No system of thought currently exists that can contain homos. The belief that two sexes constitute difference plagues our world view. Our very thought processes have become two-tiered, binaric, like animals entering the ark. Difference is sought as a way of understanding our world. Male–male and female–female desire buckles this logic in a profound and underestimated way. The appropriation of gender inversion as the only explanation/representation of same-sexness, and the consolidation of this belief by homosexual writers such as Symonds et al., has damaged homosexuals for over a century, establishing homosexuality as antithetical to traditional gender roles. The responses against such a belief have attacked effeminacy in men and butchness in women; have been anti-female, misogynistic and homophobic. Yet, need this be the case? Effeminate or misogynistic? Active or passive? Doesn’t homosexual desire offer an ideal opportunity
to rethink the ways desire has been theorized within heterologic systems of thought?

If gender and sexual categories are historically constructed, and if the mechanisms of their emergence and maintenance can be understood, then they are open to transformation. This is something that has been instigated by the Queer movement, which has refused old categories and started working towards the theorization of new ways of seeing desire. This has meant not just challenging the category of sexuality, but also the “indescribably wide range of social institutions” in which “the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now”23. The body has entered theory and introduced there all the chaos of desire. The old order is crumbling. It has become clear that something is lacking in ‘lack’. And that something is the productive, creative, imaginative excess of bodies that matter. “We need a non-taxonomic method”; one that “can express queer desire as a desire that is different in kind rather than different in degree from other manifestations of desire”24.

By seeing the association of femininity and male homosexuality as a discursive and performative phenomenon in the service of a heterosexual/heterological hegemony, we can begin what Haver calls “a praxis of a poiesis, first and last erotic”.25 And this poiesis, this realizing “the object […] as the result produced by an always already fully accomplished subjectivity (or a subjectivity that will be accomplished in and through poiesis)”,26 is “a route, a mapping, an impossible geography – impossible not because it does not exist, but because it exists and does not exist exactly at the same time”27; what Golding calls the “otherside of otherness”.28

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26 Ibid.
27 Golding, ‘Sexual Manners’, 166.
Foucault claimed that “a normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centred on life” (HS, 144). Centred on life because heterosexuality must be construed and promoted in terms of procreating life, leaving homosexuality to be set up in opposition to this; in opposition to life (AIDS has only reinforced this). This is because life, rather than pleasure, has been the focus of scientific attention. Pleasure cannot be quantified, measured, categorized by scientific enquiry; but life can. Therefore, the technology of power which has been the chief strategy of the medical profession for the last one hundred years has ignored pleasure. So much so that pleasure has been rendered as antithetical to life. Pleasure vs. Life. Coterminous with this was the capitalist demand for profitable production, whereby pleasure became antithetical to production as well as reproduction.²⁹ Foucault foregrounded pleasure over desire because a politics of pleasure would diminish the normalizing gaze of medical enquiry and destabilize the claim to rightness of heterosexuality. Desire has been used as a measure of pathology.³⁰

As we approach the millennium, the time is ripe for a break from the old notions of desire. If the nominational shift from ‘lesbian and gay’ to ‘queer’ is to achieve anything, let it be a re-definition of same-sex desire that is not reliant on dominant fictions of what a sexual relationship should be; a definition that doesn’t privilege difference over sameness, the (public) phal- lus over the (private) anus; one that recognizes in all its radical potentiality the reality of two bodies exchanging pleasure; a different economy of bodies and pleasures, as Foucault called for, which doesn’t work within the violence hierarchy of binary male/female, characterized as it is – like all binarisms – by that deep cut³¹ (’/’) to which heterosexual doctors could not administer aid, but could only leave to fester, for a whole century. By refusing gender difference as the ground for the figuring of our desires, and instead foregrounding bodies and pleasures, we

could begin to equalize sexuality and work towards a true sexual
democracy, a true Homotopia.